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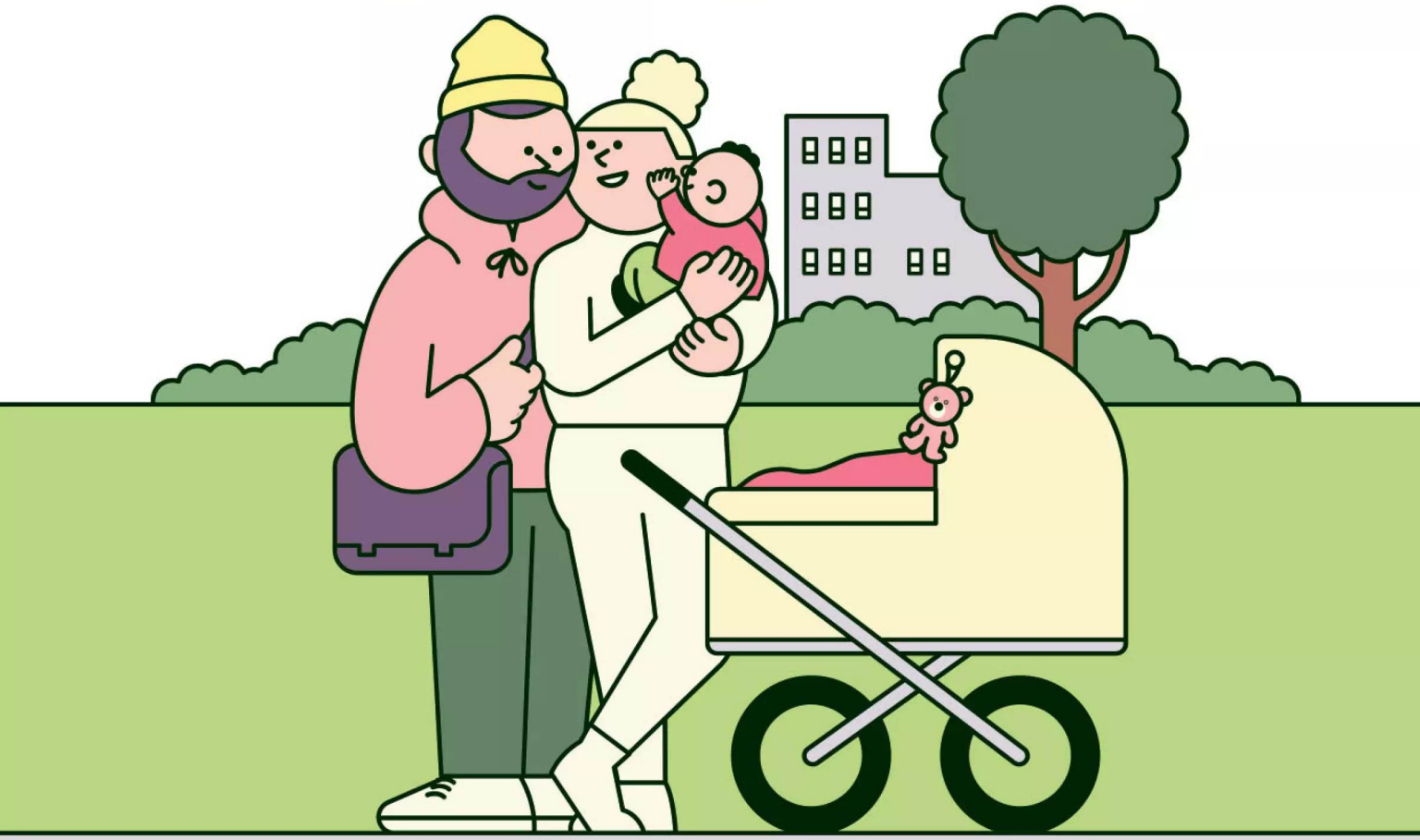

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE MEGA DRIVE CONVERSION?

DARRAN JONES

Do you even have to ask? Sega's adaptation of *Strider* convinced me that the Mega Drive was worth selling my Master System for.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof
Currently playing: *Balatro*
Favourite game of all time: *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast*

TIM EMPEY

So many to choose from, but I probably played *Street Fighter II: Special Champion Edition* more than most, it was arcade perfect in my mind at the time.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go
Currently playing: *Indiana Jones And The Great Circle*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

NICK THORPE

What a tough choice! Let's go with *NBA Jam Tournament Edition*, a game that pretty much caused me to buy a multitap for my Mega Drive by itself.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *Sonic Boom: Rise Of Lyric*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

ANDY SALTER

For what felt like years SNES owners mocked Mega Drive fans for the lack of *Street Fighter II* on the Sega system, that was until 1993 when we got the *Special Champion Edition*.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

RORY MILNE

Virtua Racing was a glimpse of the future and a hell of a ride that the Mega Drive just couldn't look at. Thankfully Sega had other ideas.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Nodes Of Yesod*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

STUART HUNT

Virtua Racing. Why? SVP chip aside, it's an astonishing arcade port that proved the Mega Drive still had plenty of gas left in the tank.
Expertise: Games with flying bits in them
Currently playing: *Super Mario Bros Wonder*
Favourite game of all time: *Tomb Raider*

PAUL DRURY

Virtua Racing for the technical achievement plus opting for the bird's eye view always made me feel like I was God playing *Micro Machines*.
Expertise: Dodging deer on a snowboard
Currently playing: *New World: Aeternum*
Favourite game of all time: *Sheep In Space*

ANDREW FISHER

NBA Jam – fast and fun, especially with two players.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *3D Don't Die Mr Robot*
Favourite game of all time: *Wizball*

PAUL ROSE

Bonanza Bros for me. It's a true classic.
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: *Thank Goodness You're Here*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*

LOADING...

As a regular visitor to Poole Quay Amusements, I always looked forward to playing the arcade games I enjoyed there in the comfort of my own home. Sadly, many Amstrad CPC conversions didn't always match the majesty of their coin-op counterparts. I think that's one of the main reasons why I fell in love with Sega's Mega Drive.

When I first saw one running in my local home-computer store, the first thing that struck me was how accurate *Golden Axe* and *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* looked. They *seemed* identical to the original games, and whilst this wasn't really the case, they stood head and shoulders about the versions you could play on home micros.

Our latest issue not only looks at some of the best arcade conversions on the Mega Drive, but also examines what made it so capable of playing them, as they were arguably the system's bread and butter before *Sonic The Hedgehog* became a success.

Other highlights of this issue include a look at Activision's many Atari 2600 games, why Ultimate's *Jetpac* is still a blast to play and how *Dizzy: Prince Of The Yolkfolk* and *Panza Kick Boxing* came to be. We also speak to Peter Molyneux about *Dungeon Keeper* and chat to Matt Yeo about his fascinating career in print.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

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Mega Drive Arcade Hits

Developers of classic arcade conversions revisit Sega's 16-bit console and look at what made it so good for converting the arcade games of the time

Ultimate Guide: Jetpac

Everything you need to know about Ultimate's impossibly slick shooter

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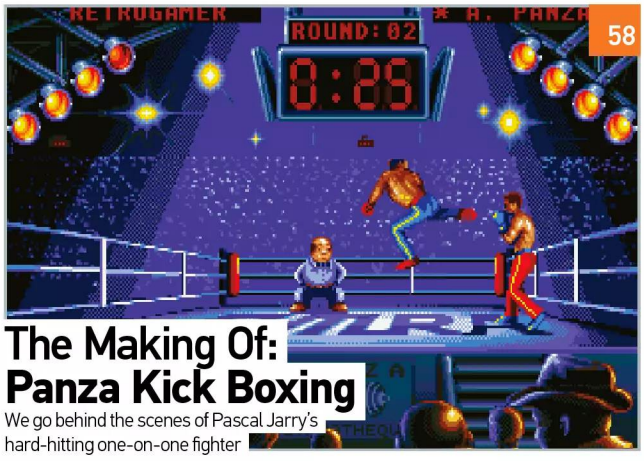

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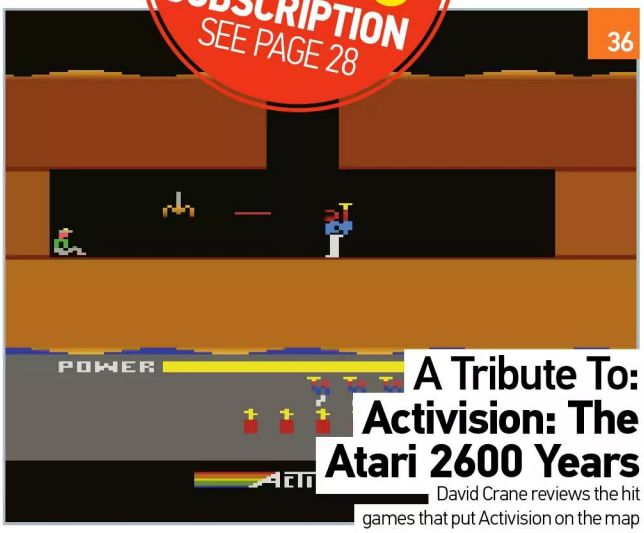
The Making Of: Panza Kick Boxing

We go behind the scenes of Pascal Jarry's hard-hitting one-on-one fighter



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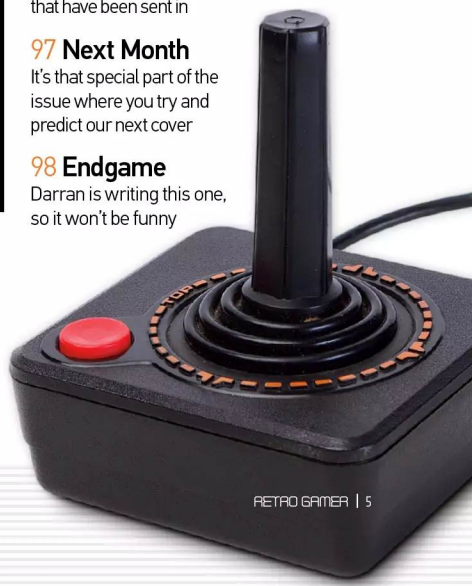

A VINTAGE YEAR

2025 is looking like it will be a great year for retro fans

» [PlayStation 5] *Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater* looks great. Konami is on a great run at the moment.

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Nick loves travelling through time, but he doesn't enjoy reliving the console wars. What will he discover this month?

As a magazine that covers gaming's past, it means we're always looking back at the good old days. That doesn't mean we don't get excited about gaming's future though, and this year is already looking like it will be great for retro fans.

From the magazine's perspective, there's a huge number of big anniversaries to look forward to. *Super Mario Bros* and the NES both celebrate their 40th anniversaries, as do the likes of *Tetris*, *Space Harrier*, *Ghosts 'N Goblins*, *Finders Keepers*, *Paperboy*, *Commando*, *Gradius* and many more. *Panzer Dragoon*, *Chrono Trigger*, *Street Fighter Alpha*, *Command & Conquer*, *Worms* and *Rayman* are amongst the classic titles celebrating their 30th anniversaries, while *Resident Evil 4*, *Guitar Hero*, *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *God Of War* are all turning 20.

» [PlayStation] It's mad to think that *God Of War* is 20 years old now. Will it be getting a **Retro Gamer** cover though?

> "This year is already looking like it will be great for retro fans"

Many of the above games will be appearing in the magazine over the next 13 issues and some may even grace the cover. However, let's take this opportunity to look at the new things coming out that are worth getting excited about.

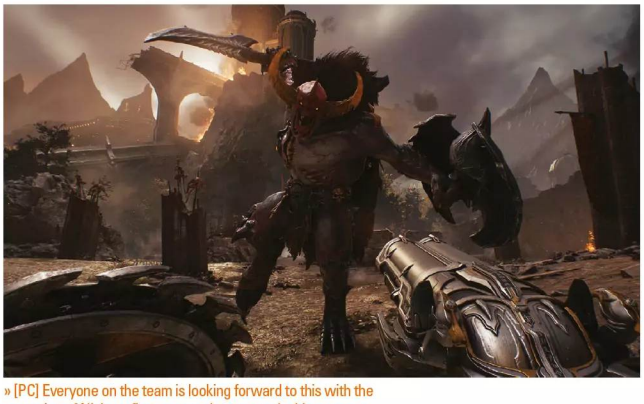
In terms of hardware perhaps the biggest incoming release is the Analogue^{3D}, Analogue's exciting 4K take on the Nintendo 64. While no firm date has been given yet, we're confident it will make its projected 2025 release date. Retro Games Ltd will be unleashing a new full-size Amiga system in 2025, which we're guessing will most likely be a take on THE A500 Mini. It's also promising two new accessories as well. Blaze Entertainment loves releasing hardware, so we wouldn't be surprised if its recently announced SNK partnership will include at least one new Super Pocket and some Evercade Alpha variants. *Zoo Keeper* and *Elevator Action*, Numskull's latest Quarter Arcades are also due this year.

In terms of games, there's lots to look forward to in 2025. One of the biggest is Konami's remake of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, which was initially planned for 2024 but pushed back for a 2025 release. It also has its long-awaited remakes of *Suikoden 1* and *2* in the works as well, along with *Yu-Gi-Oh!: Early Days Collection*, which will feature a large number of Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance games. Thanks to recent efforts like *Castlevania Dominus Collection* and Bloober Team's remake of *Silent Hill 2*, Konami has been on something of a roll, so hopefully this will continue.

While the Switch 2 will inevitably drop sometime in 2025, Nintendo has been quiet about

» [PC] Darran's recently played through the *Onimusha* games, so he's excitedly awaiting *Way Of The Sword*.

» [PC] Remasters of *Tomb Raider IV, V* and *VI* will be dropping in February.



» [PC] Everyone on the team is looking forward to this with the exception of Nick, as first-person shooters make him queasy.

new software. We're confident that *Metroid Prime 4: Beyond* will double up as a swan song Switch game and Switch 2 launch game, while *Pokémon Legends: Z-A* and *Professor Layton And The New Age Of Steam* are also planned.

While we're on the subject of Switch, Kickstarter backers should receive their *The Last Ninja Collection* sometime in 2025, *Dragon Quest I & II HD-2D Remake* is planned and Limited Run Games will be re-releasing *Gex Trilogy*. *R-Type Tactics Cosmos* will also be dropping (expect most of those we've mentioned to get physical PS4/PS5 releases as well).

Fans of *Croc: Legend Of The Gobbos* will be getting a remaster in 2025 and Capcom will be releasing *Capcom Fighting Collection 2*. *Monster Hunter Wilds* is just around the corner, as is *Like A Dragon: Pirate Yakuza In Hawaii*, which continues Sega's long-running *Yakuza* series. *Civilization VII* is another big game dropping in February, while the second set of *Tomb Raider* remasters will be releasing on Valentine's Day.

Assassin's Creed: Shadows will be dropping in the first quarter of 2025, *Metal Slug Tactics* will be getting a physical release and *Doom: The Dark Ages* is being primed as well (although we'd imagine it will see a release in the tail-end of the year. *Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves* is looking like it's going to be fantastic fun and the latest game in Microsoft's *Fable* series should make its debut.

Just as we were going to press, a slew of new games were announced at this year's The Game Awards show. Sega revealed a new *Virtua Fighter* game and a *Sonic*-themed kart racer, while Saber Interactive surprised everyone with the news of a new *Turok* game. Capcom also had some aces up its sleeve, including the reveal of a brand-new *Okami* game and *Onimusha: Way Of The Sword*, although both titles won't make 2025. The Game Kitchen showed off the stunning-looking *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound*, while Bandai Namco's *Shadow Labyrinth* sees Pac-Man starring in a dark and moody Metroidvania from Tekken producer Katsuhiro Harada.

We've only briefly touched on the first few months of the year, but you can already see that there's a lot of retro goodness on the way. As always, you can expect to see most, if not all of these titles covered in the magazine once they finally arrive. ✱

» The Analogue[3D] is looking like an essential piece of kit for N64 owners.

GAL GUNS DO CASTLEVANIA

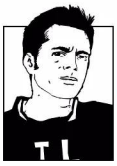
Fans of Metroidvanias would do well to keep an eye on *Gal Guardians: Servants Of The Shard*, which will be dropping in February. This sequel to *Demon Purge*, a spin-off of the *Gal Gun* series, will once again offer co-operative play and continues the adventures of Kirika and Masha. The first one was a fun take on the later *Castlevania* games and we're keen to see what Inti Creates manages with the sequel. Expect a review soon.

TO BE DELISTED TAKES SEGA

Sega recently delisted a large number of digital games from numerous store fronts. Casualties included *Sega Mega Drive Classics, Jet Set Radio, NiGHTS Into Dreams, Crazy Taxi, Sonic The Fighters* and many more. As disappointing as this news is, we can't help but think they'll all be cynically returning in brand-new compilations for the incoming Switch 2. It once again highlights the perils of digital ownership.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Crash Live 2024



One of the great joys of having been on the telly 25 years ago is that if I have a gripe with a company for not delivering something or cancelling something, I can Tweet about it and generally get it sorted out sharpish.

Another bonus is I get invited to various events and sometimes even asked to take part. The latest was the Crash Live event in Kenilworth. This is a beautiful coming together of Spectrum lovers organised by the mighty Chris Wilkins. He's clearly a lunatic – reviving a long-dead magazine in a time when printed media is on its way out (not you **Retro Gamer**!). But it works. And there are a few reasons. First up is it's bloody good. And the reason it's so good is Chris is incredibly passionate about it. Have a chat with him about it and you can hear the love he pours into each issue.

And people are hungry for this stuff. Walking through the packed venue, I felt a little like an interloper. I never owned a Spectrum and was worried I would get called out as the fraud I so obviously am. But I was welcomed, sometimes by actual open arms. I have to say it – everyone there was so lovely to me. Perhaps it's because with my thick head of hair I looked like a king to a lot of these gentlemen, but I think it's more to do with the fact that ZX owners are lovely people.

I was asked to host a Q&A with David Jones. Once I'd established it was the creator of *Spellbound* and not Bowie or a Monkee, I was thrilled. Coders like David are absolute legends, pioneers of the gaming movement. What's beautiful is seeing all the guests be confronted with the love that so many people clearly feel for them. For a lot of these guys, they thought they'd been forgotten, that the games they made had slipped away like the disposable piece of pop culture we assumed they were. For them to be shown that 40 years later so many people are not only grateful for their work but still play them must be mind-blowing.

Other notable mentions go to everyone selling stuff. Marc Jowett actually makes a living selling gaming magazines and books, imagine! And the chap (sorry, I forgot your name) who sold me the OG Casio keyboard that was all the rage in 1982, I salute you. I wanted one so badly and my parents never got the hint. Well up yours mum and dad. I can now play *Axel F* and the *EastEnders* theme to a bossa nova beat ANYTIME I WANT.

My plan in 2025 is to make it to more events and meet more of you. Working at home as a counsellor (which is what I do now) can be a lonely, isolating way of life. Having people come up to me, shaking my hand and chatting really is heartwarming. If you do see me at any of these gatherings, don't be shy! *

> "Coders like David are absolute legends, pioneers of the gaming movement"

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

A different process

Believe it or not, this column isn't my only source of income. Though **Retro Gamer** obviously pays me a king's ransom for these 500-odd words every month, it isn't quite enough to cover the mortgage. The rest of my income is pretty much divided between my YouTube channel – going by the name of Digitiser, of course – and work as a screenwriter. The latter, in fact, is the longest job I've ever had; longer even than I was a full-time games journalist.

Weirdly, I've only ever written for three videogames. Recently, I helped polish the script for Pocketwatch Games' *Monaco 2*, and I'm assisting with the writing of an indie adventure called *Super Quantum Witch 3000*.

Oddly, *SQW3000* has ended up using some narrative ideas I had for the first videogame I ever provided the script for – Zed Two's 2004 tactical turn-based shooter *Future Tactics: The Uprising*. Which, I've just realised, was over 20 years ago and now I'm going to jump off a cliff…

In that instance, the producers – John and Ste Pickford – couldn't agree; one of them hated my idea (which I'm not revealing here in order to preserve *Quantum Witch*'s plot) while the other loved it. In the end, we went in a different direction.

Of the three games I've written for, the process has been different every time. The closest one to writing for film or TV was *Future Tactics*, in that I was pretty much just writing cutscenes.

I'm not always the biggest fan of cutscenes – unless they're exceptional – as I believe the narrative should ideally be contained within the gameplay. The Pickfords had come to me with the skeleton of an idea – a central gameplay conceit and bunch of character archetypes – and the outline of the levels/missions. I took that and then tried to shape a narrative around what they were working on gameplay-wise. I aimed to ensure that each mission served some sort of narrative purpose.

I did push for there to be dialogue within the missions themselves, to make it feel like there was less of an abrupt shift between gameplay and cutscenes, though as I recall that didn't end up happening. I'm a big *Half-Life 2* fan, and was always of the point of view that less is more with game narratives.

But… I'd been hired to do a job, so I tried hard to justify the cutscenes, and not have them just be superfluous, or simple mission briefings. I tried to think of my work on the game as a complete script, with the mission levels as the action scenes.

At the same time, much as I enjoyed writing those scenes, I did also have a slightly weary feeling at the thought of how many people would just skip past them. I mean, I've been guilty of that enough times…

In fact, it wasn't really until *The Last Of Us* that I really experienced a game with a story that properly gripped me and connected with me on an emotional level. That showed me the potential of what game stories can be. Plus, I'm not dead yet. I'd still love to write for more games, big or small. I mean, I've got BAFTA nominations for pity's sake… anyone…? ✱

> "Of the three games I've written for, the process has been different every time"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:
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CHRIS ABBOTT WITH COMPOSER WATCH IN 1985
MIKE MECH GETS A MINI REVIEW (WE DON'T DO 'EM!)
FREEZE64 ISSUE #56 R.I.P. OLI

» Vinny has assembled a good team of contributors, including the likes of Julian 'Jaz' Rignall and Chris Abbott.

» After running *FREEZE64* for eight years as a part-time project, Vinny Mainolfi is now going full time with the popular magazine.

FREEZE64

Vinny Mainolfi on turning his popular magazine into a full-time job

If you're not aware, *FREEZE64* is one of the longest-running retro magazines on the market. For years, it's been a part-time project by Vinny Mainolfi, but he's now decided to turn the magazine into a new full-time job. Here's what you can expect.

So Vinny, tell us about your decision to go full time with *FREEZE64*.
After 17 years as a presentations and graphics specialist for a global business, I was unexpectedly made redundant. This sudden change made me realise that the next step in my career had to be something I was truly passionate about. That's why it was an easy decision to turn *FREEZE64*, my eight-year-old hobby that was already paying for itself, into my full-time endeavour. I had to consider where I could cut costs in the logistics of producing a physical 'zine and also explore ways to add value without compromising the quality. This exciting new chapter is something I'm genuinely looking forward to!

You've created over 72 issues now. What have you learned about magazine craft in that time?
Without sounding overly confident, I was already familiar with the writing, designing, marketing, accounting and logistical aspects of it. What I didn't anticipate was the sheer amount of time needed to make everything work. It's certainly enough to keep me busy full time; now I just need to ensure it can also provide a sustainable income.

What does *FREEZE64* offer over similar single-format retro magazines?
With *FREEZE64*, I focus on sharing feelings and emotions rather than opinions. While it's easy to be critical or offer advice, our goal is to provide a more human perspective on game development and C64 gaming. I may not be 'famous' enough to voice strong opinions to our subscribers and readers, but I'm always eager to share my emotional reactions and the feelings I get from playing these games.

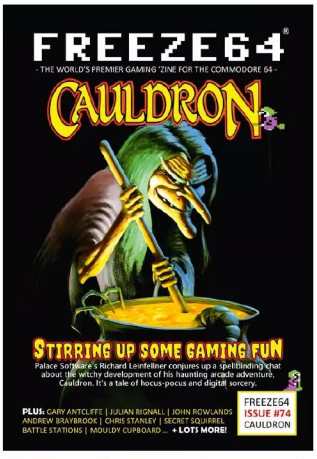
What are the biggest challenges when working on an independent magazine?
The logistics are tough – physically checking, packing, labelling and posting around 500 copies per issue is a real challenge. But it's incredibly satisfying when it's all done, and readers start receiving their copies. Another challenge is treating every subscriber as

> "I already have around 20 interviews in the pipeline, most of which are personal favourites"
> VINNY MAINOLFI

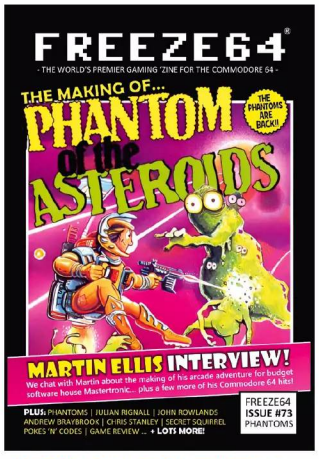
» *FREEZE64* has been running for an impressive eight years now. Order it from freeze64.com

» Part of *FREEZE64*'s success is in covering classic games on its covers, as well as modern ones.

» Vinny admits that posting nearly 500 issues of the mag can be quite the challenge.


FREEZE64
- THE WORLD'S PREMIER GAMING 'ZINE FOR THE COMMODORE 64 -
CAULDRON
STIRRING UP SOME GAMING FUN
Palace Software's Richard Leinfellner conjures up a spellbinding chat about the witchy development of his haunting arcade adventure, Cauldron. It's a tale of hocus-pocus and digital sorcery.
PLUS: GARY ANTCLIFFE | JULIAN RIGNALL | JOHN ROWLANDS | ANDREW BRAYBROOK | CHRIS STANLEY | SECRET SQUIRREL | BATTLE STATIONS | MOULDY CUPBOARD ... + LOTS MORE!
FREEZE64 ISSUE #74 CAULDRON

» Here's the front cover of issue 74. It looks like it's going to be another cracker.


FREEZE64
- THE WORLD'S PREMIER GAMING 'ZINE FOR THE COMMODORE 64 -
THE MAKING OF...
PHANTOM of the ASTEROIDS
THE PHANTOMS ARE BACK!!
MARTIN ELLIS INTERVIEW!
We chat with Martin about the making of his arcade adventure for budget software house Mastertronic... plus a few more of his Commodore 64 hits!
PLUS: PHANTOMS | JULIAN RIGNALL | JOHN ROWLANDS | ANDREW BRAYBROOK | CHRIS STANLEY | SECRET SQUIRREL | POKES 'N' CODES | GAME REVIEW ... + LOTS MORE!
FREEZE64 ISSUE #73 PHANTOMS

» Martin Ellis is the latest C64 developer to be interviewed and Vinny has many more lined up.

an individual and giving them my full attention when needed. I completely understand that each one wants to be treated as a friend, and I strive to offer that kind of personal service and support. It's incredibly draining, but also very rewarding.

How do you decide on what games to feature in each issue?
Over the past few years, I've been building up a collection of Commodore 64 developer interviews. I take each one in the order it was originally conducted and select a game from that developer that I enjoy and that would look great on the cover. For January 2025, we're featuring *Phantom Of The Asteroid*, programmed by Martin Ellis, who I interviewed three years ago! It's taken this long to get to his interview and finally publish it. February 2025 will showcase *Cauldron* (Palace Software) by Richard Leinfellner. We have a fantastic interview with him about the development of his incredible game.

What have been your personal highlights from the first issues and why?
To be honest, creating each issue of *FREEZE64* is both a highlight and a personal achievement for me. I've cherished every moment of it. On top of that, receiving so much love and respect from my C64 game-development heroes, who honour me by subscribing, is the ultimate recognition. You can't ask for more respect than that!

Are there any interviewees you're still looking to cover?
Absolutely, there are so many! The great news is that I already have around 20 interviews in the pipeline, most of which are personal favourites. Recently, we featured Paul Norman in issues 71 and 72, where he discussed the development of *Forbidden Forest* and *Aztec Challenge* – both incredibly iconic games. If I had to choose two C64 developers I'd love to interview, it would be Nigel Johnstone (*Engineer Humpty*, *Humpty Meets The Fuzzies*, *Humpty in the Garden*, *Spooks*, *Captive*) and Kevin Moughtin (*Booty*, *Thunderbirds*, *Exodus*). They're both game-development heroes of mine.

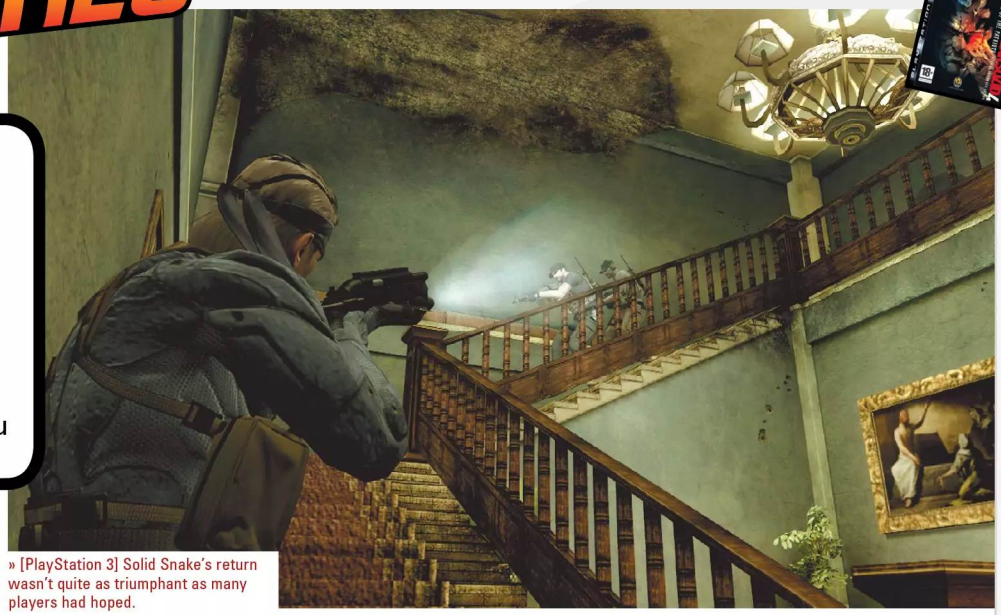
How regular will *FREEZE64* be now that you'll be focussing on it full time?
My goal is to publish 11 regular monthly issues per year, along with about two special editions. Currently, I'm working on a *Maps & Levels* special, which I plan to release in April 2025.

Will the price of the magazine stay the same, and how challenging is it covering postage costs, particularly overseas ones?
Yes, the pricing will remain the same. However, postage costs continue to rise, and unfortunately, there's not much I can do about that. These increases will be added as they occur. For those who want the nostalgic experience of holding a physical 'zine, the postage cost is simply part of the package.

Where do you hope to see *FREEZE64* in five years time?
FREEZE64 will remain the same emotionally charged, thoughtful, dynamic, engaging and up-to-date Commodore 64 'zine you know and love! ✱

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

JULY 2008 – Summer blockbuster season is truly upon us, as we've got swords, Solid Snake and Steven Spielberg to tempt you this month. The beach on this summer holiday is made from the sands of time, and Nick Thorpe is offering you a bucket and spade



» [PlayStation 3] Solid Snake's return wasn't quite as triumphant as many players had hoped.

NEWS JULY 2008

Venus Williams defeated her younger sister Serena Williams to win the Wimbledon ladies' championship for the fifth time on 5 July. This was the third time the sisters had met in the final, with Serena having won their two previous meetings in 2002 and 2003. The following day, Rafael Nadal won the gentlemen's championship by ending Roger Federer's five-year winning streak, after having fallen to him in the previous two finals.

On 21 July, former Bosnian politician Radovan Karadzic was arrested in Belgrade for crimes committed during the Bosnian War of 1992-1995. His trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia began in 2010, and in 2016 he was convicted of genocide for his role in the Srebrenica massacre, in which over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed. He was also convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and is currently serving a life sentence at HMP Parkhurst on the Isle Of Wight.

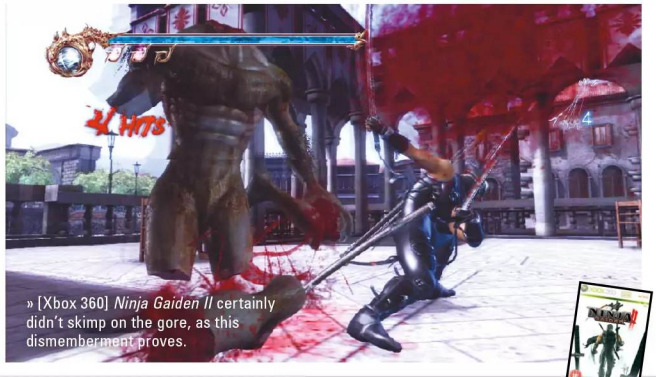
The pavilion on the Grand Pier in Weston-super-Mare burned down on 28 July, after delays in notifying firefighters allowed the blaze to grow out of control. A new pavilion was built at a cost of £39 million and opened in October 2010.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM JULY 2008

The hotly anticipated *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots* arrived on Sony's PlayStation 3 this month, and fans were hoping that Hideo Kojima's latest stealth action game would do wonders for the console. However, *games™* declared the game an example of "flawed brilliance" bemoaning that in relying heavily on cutscenes, "Kojima has missed a number of opportunities to give the player a more direct role in *Guns Of The Patriots*' most important sequences." The magazine's 8/10 score was matched by *Edge*, which noted that some cutscenes were "perilously close to the 90-minute mark", but praised the gameplay, impressed by "the AI honouring all kinds of approach". *Play* gave it 92%, calling it "a varied, engaging and entertaining epic".

Over on the Xbox 360, Ryu Hayabusa returned to slice and dice his way through demonic hordes in *Ninja Gaiden II*. But as *games™* said in a 7/10 review, it didn't "have the same 'wow' factor that *Ninja Gaiden* provided when it arrived on Xbox". *X360*'s 7/10 review complained that, "The eight or so missions that make up the middle section of the game just seem unloved." *Official Xbox 360 Magazine* felt that Team Ninja's game had "tons going for it" and gave it 8/10, but also couldn't "remember the last game we played with bosses and higher-end enemies this sloppy". *360* gave the game 4/5, saying that "truly awful camera controls" were "the only stain" on "the pinnacle of adult-orientated action gaming".

Sticking with the theme of summer blockbusters, EA unleashed its Wii puzzle game *Boom Blox*, proudly trumpeting the involvement of Steven Spielberg. *Edge* gave the game 8/10, feeling that it was "easy to understand, it has a masterful user interface" and was "simply a game you couldn't imagine being on any other system". *Official Nintendo Magazine* felt that it was "about as casual as puzzle games get" but that "there's a whole level of depth here that most casual players won't even dream of dipping their toes



» [Xbox 360] *Ninja Gaiden II* certainly didn't skimp on the gore, as this dismemberment proves.

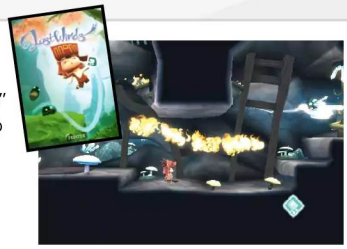
in" and gave it 90%. However, *games™* assessed the game as being "almost devoid of challenge" and "a mind-bender that bends no minds" giving it 6/10.

Also on the Wii this month, downloadable WiiWare games finally hit the UK. *LostWinds* was the star of the opening bunch, a platformer in which you draw gusts of wind to propel your character around. The game received 8/10 from *nRevolution*, which felt it was "a special game, with that added spark we usually only expect from first-party titles", but that "the adventure feels like it's just about to take off right as you come to its end". *ONM* gave it 83%, agreeing that it was a "joyous little platformer" that was "all over too soon" and *Edge*'s 8/10 review expressed similar sentiments, but declared it "exactly the type of game the console deserves".

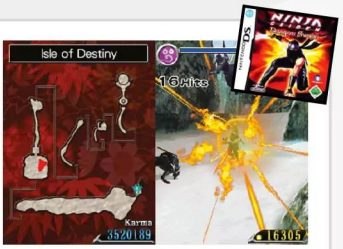
Still, the best-received game of the month was *Race Driver: Grid* on the HD consoles and PC. The game reviewed well across the board, earning scores of 9/10 from *Edge*, 85% from *Play*, 4/5 from *360* and 8/10 each from *OXM*, *games™* and *X360*. *PC Gamer* captured the critical mood around this "remarkably good-looking" game well in its 88% review, feeling that, "Demanding controls and fast-'n'-loose physics means it's not quite the game to unite the warring arcade and sim tribes, but it's the sweet spot if you don't tie yourself to either camp." Likewise, *Total PC Gaming* felt it was "very accessible and intuitive", but "boasts all the adornments and details of the hardcore game" and scored it 8/10.

Despite worries that bringing *Ninja Gaiden* to the DS was "at best brave, at worst downright lunacy", *games™* was happy to be proven wrong about *Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword*, saying that it "deserves to be placed alongside its bigger brothers as an example of how 3D combat should be done" in an 8/10 review. *ONM* also felt it was a "remarkable technical achievement" and that the touch-screen controls would have you "wielding the stylus like an orchestra conductor, tossing enemies into the air and sending Ryu pinging around the screen like Yoda in his prime". That was good for an 82% score, with the game missing out on higher marks for a "relatively brief" seven-hour completion time.

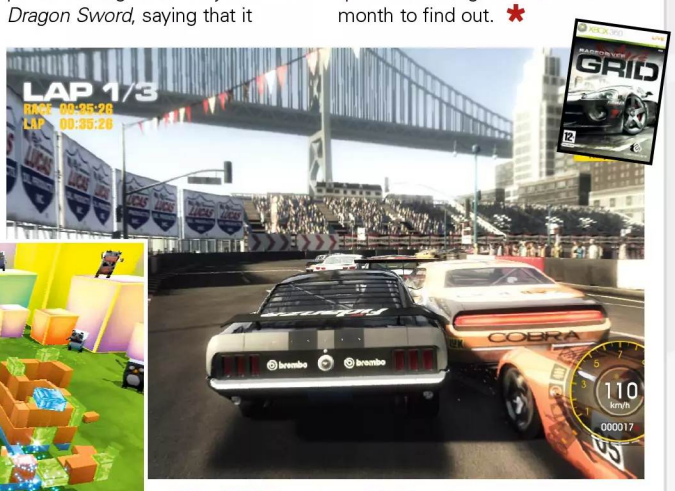
Will the rest of the summer be quite so exciting? Join us next month to find out. ✱



» [Wii] WiiWare has long closed, but *LostWinds* is now on PC via Steam.



» [DS] Who would have guessed that *Ninja Gaiden* would work so well via the stylus?



» [Xbox 360] Codemasters certainly knew how to do excellent racers, as it proved with *Grid*.

» [Wii] Interested players should seek out the updated *Boom Blox: Bash Party* instead of the original.

CHARTS

JULY 2008

XBOX 360

1 – **Grand Theft Auto IV** (Rockstar)
2 – **Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare** (Activision)
3 – **Halo 3** (Microsoft)
4 – **Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas** (Ubisoft)
5 – **Iron Man** (Sega)

WII

1 – **Wii Fit** (Nintendo)
2 – **Mario Kart Wii** (Nintendo)
3 – **Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games** (Sega)
4 – **Sega Superstars Tennis** (Sega)
5 – **Game Party** (Midway)

PSP

1 – **Pro Evolution Soccer 2008** (Konami)
2 – **God Of War: Chains Of Olympus** (Sony)
3 – **Iron Man** (Sega)
4 – **FIFA 08** (EA)
5 – **Football Manager 2008** (Sega)

MUSIC

1 – **Dance Wiv Me** (Dizzee Rascal feat. Calvin Harris & Chrome)
2 – **All I Ever Wanted** (Basshunter)
3 – **No Air** (Jordin Sparks feat. Chris Brown)
4 – **Closer** (Ne-Yo)
5 – **Stay With Me** (Ironik)

THIS MONTH IN...

X360

After discovering that Game and Gamestation made up to five times more profit on used games than independent retailers, the magazine urges "make the only difference you can and look up an independent when trading in your games".

Official PlayStation 2 Magazine

The PS2 may not quite be dead, but time is up for its magazine. "Yup, with 100 issues under its belt and over 12.2 million copies sold, the biggest and best-selling games mag the UK has ever seen is coming to an end."

Official PlayStation Magazine

OPM investigates the "bullshot" – how screenshots are manipulated, by whom and for what reasons. "Nobody gives a shit. Nobody buys honesty, that's the way we are as a species," says the forthright David Jaffe.

Hydrofool

TIME TO GET WET AGAIN?

» AMSTRAD CPC » 1987 » GARGOYLE GAMES

I've always felt that isometric games always worked best on the Amstrad. That's not to say the other 8-bit micros didn't have their own excellent renditions of these games, but I always preferred how they looked on Lord Sugar's micro.

As an Amstrad owner I was more than used to not just having hand-me-downs of ZX Spectrum releases, but rough and ready ports that somehow managed to look even worse – *R-Type*, I'm looking at you. This rarely happened with isometric games though.

Even when a game looked visually similar from a graphical point of view, the ability to display the game in multiple colours often made the Amstrad version look far more appealing – think of Ultimate's *Knight Lore*, or any Ultimate isometric adventure for that matter. Granted, a few extra colours might not sound like much in the grand scheme of things, but it's amazing how much more vibrant a game can feel thanks to a carefully considered colour palette.

Gargoyle Games' *Hydrofool* is another release that I feel greatly benefits from being played on an Amstrad and I'll take it over the Spectrum version any day of the week. It doesn't just look nicer than the Speccy offering (which does have some truly stunning pixel art) but the fact that enemies and items stand out more from the backgrounds makes it a lot easier to play as well.

That's not to say you won't face issues when playing *Hydrofool* (its keyboard setup is immensely irritating) but none of them are caused by visibility problems. Like its predecessor, *Sweevo's World*, *Hydrofool* is another challenging quest that has you entering the four distinct areas of the Deathbowl (which are all named after Elvis songs) so you can pull out their plugs and drain them of pollution.

It's a task I've never managed to complete, despite how compelling I used to find it on release. In fact, I can't remember the last time I got stuck into a really good isometric adventure. Maybe I need to go for another deep dive with *Hydrofool* again… ✱

278
RUSTOMETER
ARKO
BUBBLE

SEGA MEGA DRIVE ARCADE HITS

IF YOU WANTED ARCADE ACTION IN THE COMFORT OF YOUR HOME IN THE EARLY NINETIES, SEGA'S 16-BIT SYSTEM WAS THE MACHINE TO OWN. WE SPEAK TO THE DEVELOPERS WHO CRAMMED COIN-OPS INTO THE CONSOLE BACK THEN, AS WELL AS THOSE TAKING ON THAT CHALLENGE TODAY

WORDS BY **NICK THORPE** AND **DARRAN JONES**

It's no secret that the Mega Drive was easily Sega's most successful console, and there are a multitude of reasons for that. A certain speedy blue chap can rightfully claim some credit, innovative marketing definitely played a role and only a fool would ignore the popularity of Electronic Arts and its juggernaut sports games. However, the factor that is undoubtedly closest to the heart of the Mega Drive is its connection to the arcades – Sega built its legacy in the coin-op arena, and its expertise in that area of the business would shape every aspect of the console, from its hardware design and software library to even its marketing.

Development of the Mega Drive began in mid-1986. Hideki Sato, who headed up Sega's home-console R&D division at the time, looked back on this time in the book *Sega Consumer History*. As translated by Shmuplations, he recalled, "By then, arcade games were using 16-bit CPUs. Arcade development was something we were very invested in, so we were always using the most cutting-edge technology there. Naturally, it started us thinking, 'What if we used that technology in a home console?'" In the book *Mega Drive/Genesis: Collected Works* by Read-Only Memory, Mega Drive hardware designer Masami Ishikawa explained that the key goals with the hardware were to have "the basic performance of the preceding system boards – the System I, System II and System 16", while incorporating backwards compatibility with Master System games.

Like the System 16, the Mega Drive would use a 16-bit Motorola 68000 as its main CPU and Zilog Z80 as a sound CPU, with a Yamaha synthesiser chip for audio. However, cost considerations kept the use of the 16-bit CPU in doubt until late on, and Ishikawa believed that Sato made the final decision on that issue. "By using the 68000 we could take advantage of the programming resources already available for arcade use," he explained, though he did note that the company's consumer game programmers were unfamiliar with the CPU. The custom graphics chip designed for the system was likewise subject to cost considerations, and compromises had to be made. "We wanted to include enlarging and minimising capabilities as well as sprite-spinning functionality, but the circuit design was becoming too large to fit on one chip, which would have lowered the production yield rate and hiked up costs, so we had to remove it from the spec," recalled Ishikawa. The system's colour palette was limited for the same reason.

> "PLAYING ALTERED BEAST IN-STORE, WITH ITS FLUIDITY, LARGE SPRITES, AND VIBRANT COLOURS, COMPLETELY BLEW AWAY MY AMIGA VERSION"
> ANDREA BALDIRAGHI

Regardless, the Mega Drive was a powerful bit of kit when it finally launched in the Japanese market in 1988, as an anecdote from Sato confirms. "I remember very fondly a demonstration we did at an announcement party for the Mega Drive, where we took the Mega Drive version of *Altered Beast* and played it next to the arcade version, and there was almost no difference." Early Japanese promotional materials for the console explained the benefits of the 16-bit CPU by telling readers that most arcade games were already using 16-bit technology, and promised "the same level of game content as in a game centre". Sega chose to put the arcade connection front and centre in its international marketing too, with "We bring the arcade experience home" used as a slogan across early Genesis adverts in print and on TV. "For the first time, the powerful technology used in arcade games has come home to let you play games that look, sound and play exactly like they do in the arcade," boldly claimed one magazine advert. Arcade games typically got top billing in the console's advertising, with double-page spreads heralding the arrival of games like *Golden Axe*, *After Burner II* and *Super Monaco GP*. Likewise, "arcade quality graphics" was a key recurring phrase in UK adverts for the console.

» [Mega Drive] *Altered Beast* was a key early demonstration of the console's power, and a good pack-in game.

Early press impressions of the Mega Drive highlighted the machine's credentials as a capable conversion platform. Writing for *Computer & Video Games*, Jaz Rignall claimed that *Altered Beast* had "looks, sounds and playability that are indistinguishable from the coin-op" and said that *Super Thunder Blade* and *Space Harrier II* offered "smooth 3D update and wonderful graphics that put the majority of existing 16-bit titles to shame". Over in the US, *Video Games & Computer Entertainment*'s Andy Eddy felt that *Altered Beast* was "a good choice to be bundled with the console; it shows off the superior visual and aural capabilities of the Genesis as well as being a popular arcade game". Not everybody was thrilled, though. In ▶

INTERVIEWEES

PAUL CARRUTHERS
- *Mortal Kombat, Terminator 2: The Arcade Game*

DAVID LEITCH
- *Mortal Kombat II, Primal Rage*

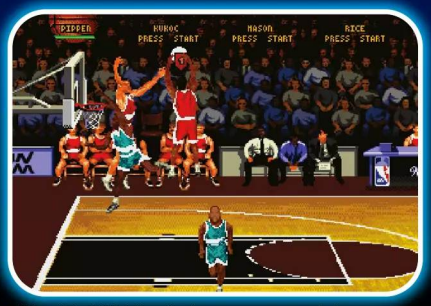
CARL HENRIK SHARSTEDT
- *NBA Hangtime*

ANDREA BALDIRAGHI
- *Mega R-Type*

MAURO XAVIER
- *Final Fight MD*

» [Mega Drive] "Acclaim had allocated a big marketing budget so they were very closely involved," Paul remembers.

» [Mega Drive] David feels that *Primal Rage*'s giant sprites were arguably "the USP of the original game".



» [Mega Drive] *NBA Hangtime* has some very smooth character animation, as you'd hope from a late release.

Electronic Gaming Monthly, Steve Harris cast doubt on the early software, saying that, "Sega does have an advantage in recognisable arcade titles [...] but these initial attempts do not take full advantage of what the machine can do."

The early strategy of focussing on arcade games paid off. "For me, they were key system sellers," says homebrew coder Andrea Baldiraghi. "Playing *Altered Beast* in-store, with its fluidity, large sprites and vibrant colours, completely blew away my Amiga version. It felt like the arcade experience had come home!" Homebrew coder Fabrice Fernandez was also won over. "I have very precise and vivid memories of the first time I saw the Mega Drive in *the* French video magazine *Tilt*. They covered the Tokyo Game Show where it was showcased, and the first screenshots of *Golden Axe*, *Thunder Force II* and especially *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* (my favourite franchise of all time), were absolutely mind-blowing," he recalls. "When I finally got my Japanese Mega Drive bundled with *Golden Axe*, I plugged in the cartridge, turned the console on, and it was there: the arcade at home. Pure magic."

Interestingly, the concessions made during the console's design process meant that the Mega Drive did struggle with the company's biggest arcade attractions. "I was never a big fan of Mega Drive versions of Sega's Super Scaler games such as *Out Run* or *After Burner II*," says Andrea. "I love real Super Scaler graphics, it gives games an incredibly joyful style, but home versions were always too sacrificed with choppy pseudo-scaling, due to the lack of proper hardware." Fabrice feels similarly. "*Super Thunder Blade* and *Galaxy Force II* are probably the worst. Mostly because the horsepower gap between the Mega Drive and the original hardware they were running on was way too high." While they were often the best home versions available at the time, they certainly didn't feel as close to the arcade experience as many of the other games available.

> **"I WATCHED THAT VHS SO MANY TIMES TRYING TO WORK OUT ALL THE NUANCES OF GAMEPLAY, AND I STILL DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH OF IT I GOT RIGHT"**
> **PAUL CARRUTHERS**

Unlike with the Master System, Sega would gain plenty of third-party support in its quest to bring the arcades home. Taito had been one of the few companies that had consistently made games available on the SG-1000 and Master System, and was converting games like *Final Blow*, *The NewZealand Story* and *Rastan Saga II* as early as 1990. Other early supporters included companies on bad terms with Nintendo – Namco was unhappy with its licensing agreement and converted the likes of *Phelios*, *Burning Force* and *Rolling Thunder 2* to Sega's machine. Atari Games' home-publishing division Tengen was going through a legal battle with Nintendo, and brought games including *Klax*, *Paperboy*, *Roadblasters* and *Pac-Mania* to the Mega Drive. With Capcom not able to work on the console directly, Sega decided to license the company's games and convert them itself, bringing over the likes of *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* and *Strider* – the latter of which it promoted heavily.

Sega's focus began to shift in the second half of 1991 as the success of *Sonic The Hedgehog* sent the console's popularity skyrocketing – where arcade games had once dominated its publishing output, more effort subsequently went into developing and promoting original software. But that success only attracted more third parties to the Sega fold, ensuring a continued supply of fresh arcade conversions. Data East had released *Midnight Resistance* in 1991 but ramped up production for 1992, bringing over *Two Crude Dudes*, *Atomic Runner* and *Captain America And The Avengers*. Despite not having an arcade presence of its own, Acclaim licensed games from Williams and Midway of the WMS Group, starting off with *Super Smash TV* in 1992, and Konami made its Mega Drive debut with *Sunset Riders* at the tail end of that year. As the fighting game boom swept arcades, Takara began to bring over SNK games like *Fatal Fury* in early 1993, and by the autumn Capcom had brought its smash hit *Street Fighter II* to Sega fans.

Paul Carruthers was the programmer of *Terminator 2: The Arcade Game* and *Mortal Kombat* for Probe, the developer that undertook conversions on Acclaim's behalf. Although the games industry was becoming larger and more globalised, Paul's experience with *Terminator 2* was decidedly old school. "Some of the testers at Probe had spent a day in an arcade in Croydon with a huge bag of 10p coins. They'd played the game from start to finish and videoed the whole thing for me," he recalls. "So I had a VHS of a complete playthrough,

» [Mega Drive] How much do you think Probe's testers spent on getting past the truck stage?

» [Mega Drive] Shooters like *Truxton* were a staple of the Mega Drive library, and still hold up well today.

» [Mega Drive] *After Burner II* was arguably the best of the Super Scaler conversions, but still lost detail.

MASTERPIECES

THE ARCADE CONVERSIONS THAT STILL WOW

GHOULS 'N GHOSTS

1989 • SEGA R&D 2

According to Den Faminico Gamer, this impressive conversion was handled by Yuji Naka after he requested that Sega license Capcom's game after seeing it in arcades. Naka did a superb job and his conversion features all the elements of the arcade original, including its majestic bosses.

GOLDEN AXE

1989 • SEGA R&D 2

The sprites are quite dinky, but no other home version came close to Sega's adaptation of its hit arcade game when it launched on its 16-bit console. It's not only extremely faithful to the arcade original, but even goes so far as to add an additional level once Death Adder is defeated.

FORGOTTEN WORLDS

1989 • SEGA R&D 2

Sega couldn't replicate Capcom's arcade control scheme, so it came up with a suitable alternative (you can rotate with the A and C buttons), allowing you to concentrate on taking down the game's huge mayors. It's a very shallow game, but it's still action packed.

STRIDER

1990 • SEGA R&D 6

Rightly hailed on release for its arcade accuracy, Sega's adaptation of Capcom's over-the-top coin-op still manages to impress. Yes there's a fair bit of flicker and certain enemy sprites are quite small, but the action is every bit as hectic as the arcade original. A genuine Mega Drive classic.

HELLFIRE

1990 • NCS

There's a shocking amount of great shmups to be found on Sega's console, but this remains one of the best. NCS does a terrific job of capturing the atmosphere of the arcade original, while the game's distinctive weapon mechanics and staggeringly tough bosses are all perfectly replicated.

ROLLING THUNDER 2

1991 • NAMCO

Namco did some fantastic work on Sega's console and its conversion of its popular arcade sequel remains a great example. It doesn't look quite as impressive as the arcade original, but it's otherwise extremely authentic to play. It also has a great password system that's as fun to use as it is helpful.

STREET FIGHTER II: SPECIAL CHAMPION EDITION

1993 • CAPCOM

It may have arrived 15 months after its SNES counterpart and required the Mega Drive's new six-button controller to get the most out of it, but fans of Capcom's fighter simply didn't care. Capcom's conversion of its arcade juggernaut is supremely good.

VIRTUA RACING

1994 • SEGA AM2

Yes it uses additional hardware to power it, but it's still astounding that Sega's arcade racer was released on its 16-bit console, let alone that it turned out to be such good fun. It's certainly rather sluggish to play when you return to it today, but it still manages to hold its own against the system's other racing games.

MORTAL KOMBAT II

1994 • PROBE SOFTWARE

The expectation for Probe's *Mortal Kombat* sequel was immense on Sega's console, but the talented team smashed it, delivering a cracking conversion that still holds up today. It's not only chock-full of content, but feels exceptionally close to the arcade original.

NBA JAM

1994 • IGUANA ENTERTAINMENT

Midway's fast-paced sports game remains a delight to play on Sega's 16-bit system and it's largely due to Iguana's excellent conversion. It's packed with content, can cater for four players and offers better load times than its Mega-CD counterpart. The later *Tournament Edition* is also worth seeking out.

» [Mega Drive] Sadly, this version of *The NewZealand Story* never saw release outside of Japan.

» [Mega Drive] *Flicky* was an odd game to release – it was old and visually dated, but still great fun.

» [Mega Drive] *Turbo OutRun* was only OK in arcades, and without the scaling it lost even more on Sega's home console.

▶ but that was about it. I watched that thing so many times trying to work out all the nuances of gameplay, and I still don't know how much of it I got right." There's an amusing twist to the tale, though. "Some time later Tony Beckwith, the producer on *Terminator 2*, admitted that he'd had the source code for it all the time, but didn't think it would help so he never told me!"

However, having good access to the arcade source materials was more common and Paul did have the assets for *Mortal Kombat*. "The source code showed me that they had used a 'Process' system common to Midway games which worked a bit like multithreading but in software. So, for example, each fighter was a Process with its own program and its own memory. There was no central game loop as other games might have had at the time. UI was a Process, the background was a Process and so on," he explains. "I figured the best way to proceed was to try and emulate this system on the Mega Drive as closely as possible so that I could then lift the game logic straight from the source code and the game should then play exactly the same as the original. With only 64KB of RAM this was very tight but I

BEYOND THE ARCADES

HOW THE MEGA DRIVE IMPROVED ARCADE CLASSICS

SUPER HANG-ON

1989 • SEGA R&D2

Sega went all out with its home conversion of *Super Hang-On*. Yes, the arcade game is faithfully replicated in all its glory, but it's dwarfed by Original Mode, which adds rivalries with other bikers, the ability to customise your bike and so much more. It makes for a truly comprehensive package.

SUPER MONACO GP

1990 • SEGA R&D2

If you're not keen on racing around on motorcycles, Sega's adaptation of its Formula 1 arcade racer added a similar campaign mode that was just as lengthy to complete. In addition to its arcade mode, World Championship contains all 16 tracks from the 1989 Formula 1 and lots of customisation and rivalry options just like *Super Hang-On*.

MERCS

1991 • SEGA CS1

Once you get bored of Sega's excellent conversion, you can lose yourself in *Mercs*' Original Mode. It plays very similarly to Sega's later *GG Shinobi* games, with your lone Merc recruiting other team members once he rescues them. You can then switch between them as you tackle each stage.

SLAP FIGHT MD

1993 • TOAPLAN/MNM SOFTWARE

In addition to an astoundingly good conversion of the (then-ageing arcade game), heading to the options menu of this Eastern exclusive reveals a brand-new game. It's a genuinely superb update with superior aesthetics and the ability to jettison power-ups to create dangerous bombs. It's pricey, so grab the incoming reissue.

GAUNTLET IV

1993 • M2

M2's first game doesn't pull any punches. It not only offers a resoundingly accurate version of the 1985 arcade hit, but adds a huge RPG-like Quest mode, which sees your adventurers clearing four elemental towers. You can even save progress, so you don't need to tackle it in one huge sitting.

» [Mega Drive] *Columns* was virtually identical to the arcade version – but then, the hardware was nearly identical too.

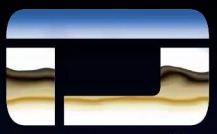
» [Mega Drive] Tengen produced some very solid conversions, with *Paperboy* being a great example.

found room for four processes – two for characters and two for weapons. Once the system was working, all the game logic went in very quickly – a couple of weeks or so."

David Leitch was the lead programmer on *Mortal Kombat II* and *Primal Rage*, and although the Mega Drive was getting on a bit by 1994, he didn't feel that the gap between the home and arcade hardware was an issue. "If you think of the essential features of *Mortal Kombat II* and *Primal Rage*, they were things that could easily be replicated on the Mega Drive. You've got two characters knocking seven bells out of each other against a scrolling background and everything's in 2D," he explains. "The main issue with both games was cartridge size. For example, early on in *Mortal Kombat II*, I implemented Liu Kang's dragon Fatality. At that stage, all the animation frames were still in the sequence and it looked fucking awesome. But if we'd stuck to that approach, we'd have needed cartridges maybe twice the size of the spec the publisher had settled on." Bigger cartridges meant higher manufacturing costs, and with *Mortal Kombat II* already at a hefty 24Mbit, animation cuts were inevitable.

"The bulk of that fell to Terry Ford, the main artist on the project," David tells us. "The general strategy was that cuts were lightest on stuff the player saw often – eg fighters idling – but had to be far more significant, just out of necessity, on stuff they only saw rarely… like Liu Kang's bloody dragon Fatality. To put it glibly, it turned his job with the animation sequences from just pressing a button, to sitting staring at them all day, figuring out how they could be most elegantly hacked, slashed and re-used. Also, bear in mind, individual frames that flash by at 60fps can get away with being a bit shonky. But if the player ends up seeing them for a relatively long time, then they need to be tidied-up. Meaning more work for Terry."

"THE GENERAL STRATEGY WAS THAT CUTS WERE LIGHTEST ON STUFF THE PLAYER SAW OFTEN"
DAVID LEITCH



f course, the Mega-CD had been introduced by that point and CD-ROMs offered vastly greater storage than cartridges – surely a boon in such situations? "The data on the CD loads quite slow so you don't get as much benefit from the large storage as you might expect," says Carl-Henrik Skarstedt, who worked on *Samurai Shodown* and *Fatal Fury Special* for the add-on and felt that its best features were elsewhere. "The major benefit of the CD add-on is the CPU power, another 68000 that is faster than the main CPU, in addition to extra RAM. We used it for runtime decompressing the sprites for the players so we could keep as many original frames as possible in the extra RAM. Of course we could stream the original background music, that adds a lot of authenticity."

"The big problem was the speed of reading data off the CD and transferring it to the CPU side of the system," confirms Paul, who also programmed the Mega-CD version of *Mortal Kombat*. "For normal gameplay this was doable by reading all the graphics off the CD before each match started. However, this meant we had to reduce the number of animation frames quite drastically and this had a terrible effect on the look and feel of the game," he explains. "Then came the biggest problem of all – the wizard Shang Tsung. He had the ability to morph between characters and there was no way we could store all those frames at once. The only answer was to read them off ▶

» [Mega Drive] *Aero Blasters* is another example of the great shoot-'em-up action available on Sega's Mega Drive.

SYSTEM SYMBIOSIS

HOW THE MEGA DRIVE GAVE BACK TO THE ARCADE SCENE

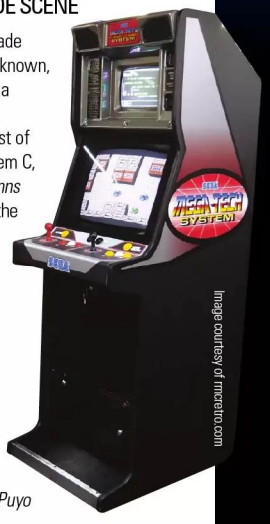


Image courtesy of rmcretro.com

» Visit @RMCRetro on YouTube to see how this cabinet was restored for play at The Cave in Chalford – book a visit at retrocollective.co.uk

While the influence of the arcade scene on the Mega Drive is well known, fewer people are aware that Sega based three arcade boards on its successful 16-bit console. The first of the bunch to arrive was the System C, which powered games like *Columns* and its sequel. This board omits the Z80 CPU and runs the Motorola 68000 CPU slightly faster than the home hardware at 8.95MHz, allowing it to handle the sound duties too. It also uses an external colour encoder for far greater colour depth than the Mega Drive. The System C2 is a minor revision that adds some audio sample playback hardware, and hosted games such as *Thunder Force AC*, *Puyo Puyo* and the Print Club photo booths.

The Mega-Tech system was essentially Sega's equivalent to Nintendo's PlayChoice-10, in that it was more of a way to try out home games than a typical arcade system. Software was distributed on cartridges that had almost the same code as their home counterparts – cheats and all – and the PCB had eight slots, allowing for a variety of games in one cabinet. Rather than getting credits and lives as usual, players paid for time on the machine, during which they could try any or all of those games until the timer ran out. A few dozen games were released in this format – notably including some Master System games and the Mega Drive version of *Tetris* that was famously recalled.

The final board was the Mega Play, which was like the Mega-Tech in that it was fundamentally the same as the Mega Drive and supported multiple cartridges – four, rather than eight. Unlike the Mega-Tech, Mega Play games played with standard credits and lives and were usually modified in various ways – typically with the goal of making them more difficult. The Mega Play received relatively little support, but premier Mega Drive titles including *Sonic The Hedgehog*, *Streets Of Rage 2* and *Gunstar Heroes* were brought to the arcade in this way.

» [Arcade] Sega clearly agreed with *Mean Machines Sega*'s "arcade quality" accolade for *Streets Of Rage 2*

» [Mega Drive] SNK licensed Mega Drive conversions to other publishers, despite tech similarities with the Neo Geo.

» [Mega Drive] *Sunset Riders* is better on the SNES. "To this day, I believe it was done intentionally," says Mauro.

» [Mega Drive] Neo Geo conversion *Super Baseball 2020* was a rare dabble in coin-op action from EA.

» [Mega Drive] Digital Eclipse brought the likes of *Defender* and *Joust* to the console late in its life.

» [Mega Drive] Cartridge size constraints often meant that speech samples were lost in games like *Klax*.

» [Mega Drive] *Bonanza Bros* was a conversion from Sega's less-renowned System 24 arcade board.

▶ the CD in real-time during gameplay and that was painful. Every time he morphed the game would just stop for a couple of seconds and it made my toes curl."

In fact, with the exception of the wonderful *Final Fight CD*, the Mega-CD was a bit of a disappointment for arcade fans. Players had high hopes that its sprite-scaling and rotation capabilities would help bring the Super Scaler games home faithfully, but it was not to be as publishers were more interested in FMV. A hardware enhancement that was more successful in its aims was the Sega Virtua Processor – a chip used for polygon generation in the Mega Drive version of *Virtua Racing*. Although noticeably cut back from the arcade original and sold for an eye-watering £70, the conversion did receive acclaim. Plans for a modular version were put into place to enable more 3D games, but instead Sega launched the more powerful 32X which achieved the same goal.

Arcade games were front and centre for the launch of the 32X – the back of the North American packaging even made the decidedly bold claim that its graphics were "as good or better than the arcades". How well the software lived up to those claims depended on what you played. For games that the Mega Drive already handled well, the differences could be very limited – some extra colours here and larger sprites there, maybe better speech, but they still felt like Mega Drive games at heart. Indeed, in the case of *Mortal Kombat II* and *Primal Rage*, they were. "The reason I'm credited for those versions is that they're essentially conversions (re-conversions?) of the Mega Drive games. I didn't work on them directly," David reveals. "The 32X games were programmed by Cameron Sheppard."

While the 32X's sprite-scaling capabilities were potent and its flat-shaded 3D games ran well, such games were falling out of favour in arcades due to the rise of games using texture-mapped 3D – a task better suited to Sega's proper 32-bit console, the Saturn. In its waning years, the ageing Mega Drive got fewer new arcade conversions, with *NBA Hangtime* being a notable exception as Sega's 16-bit machine was the oldest console to receive a conversion. Carl-Henrik, lead programmer on that game at Funcom, has good memories of the project. "We were good friends and we had a lot of fun working on this game. At least one other team member stated it was his favourite project to work on ever, and we got along well with Midway!

"We received everything we needed such as source code, all the original art assets and I think we used fax to ask questions. High Voltage worked on the PlayStation and N64 ports and we received the answers to questions they asked too. Luckily the Midway arcade hardware was a little older at the time so apart from the scaling the machines felt closer. Super Nintendo

"IT WAS HARDER THAN I EXPECTED BECAUSE I ENCOUNTERED MANY TOUGH BUGS TO RESOLVE"

MAURO XAVIER

EXTENDED PLAY

THE MEGA-CD AND 32X OFFERED CONVERSIONS NOT FOUND ON THE STANDARD MACHINE – HERE ARE FIVE WORTH CHECKING OUT

TIME GAL

1992 • WOLF TEAM

The Mega-CD played host to plenty of LaserDisc game conversions, and *Time Gal* is one of the best. While Taito's arcade original did little to expand on the *Dragon's Lair* formula, Wolf Team treated Toei's anime art with care and created a conversion that avoids the add-on's typical grainy video.

MAD DOG MCCREE

1993 • AMERICAN LASER GAMES

What do you get the Mega Drive owner who has everything? Well, *Mad Dog McCree* takes advantage of both the Mega-CD and the Menacer. The Western setting and acting are cheesy and the video transfer from LaserDisc is rough, but it adds some welcome variety to the sparse lightgun library.

STAR WARS ARCADE

1994 • SEGA INTERACTIVE

This 32X launch game is not only the best *Star Wars* experience in the Mega Drive family of consoles, but still the only home port of the Model 1 arcade game. This polygon-pushing showcase lets you take down the Death Star and Super Star Destroyer by yourself or in co-op.

SPACE HARRIER

1994 • RUTUBO GAMES

Sega was criticised for bringing such an old game to the 32X in 1994, but this is a very accurate version of the arcade original. It wipes the floor with *Space Harrier II* in terms of speed and intensity and, like *After Burner Complete*, it showcases the hardware's sprite-scaling power.

VIRTUA FIGHTER

1995 • SEGA CS4

Though it loses plenty of polygonal detail and audio quality compared to its arcade parent, the 32X version of *Virtua Fighter* brings home the gameplay and exquisite animation intact, and even has extra features over the Saturn version. The 32X was already beyond saving, but this conversion is still great.

required more optimisation such as running each team's AI every second frame. Mega Drive did not have any problems running the game," he continues. "The way we ported the source code was a little intricate, but it allowed us to match the original code precisely. We basically ported it line by line. At Funcom we spent a lot of effort on tools to help get the original art working well on Mega Drive and Super Nintendo so that helped out a lot too. The sound guys, Kim Jensen and Geir Tjelta if I remember correctly, were very experienced with the Mega Drive at this stage, and on the Super Nintendo we even had Jeroen Tel converting the music."

» [Mega Drive] *Alien Storm* was a solid conversion of Sega's arcade game, but was rather light on extras.

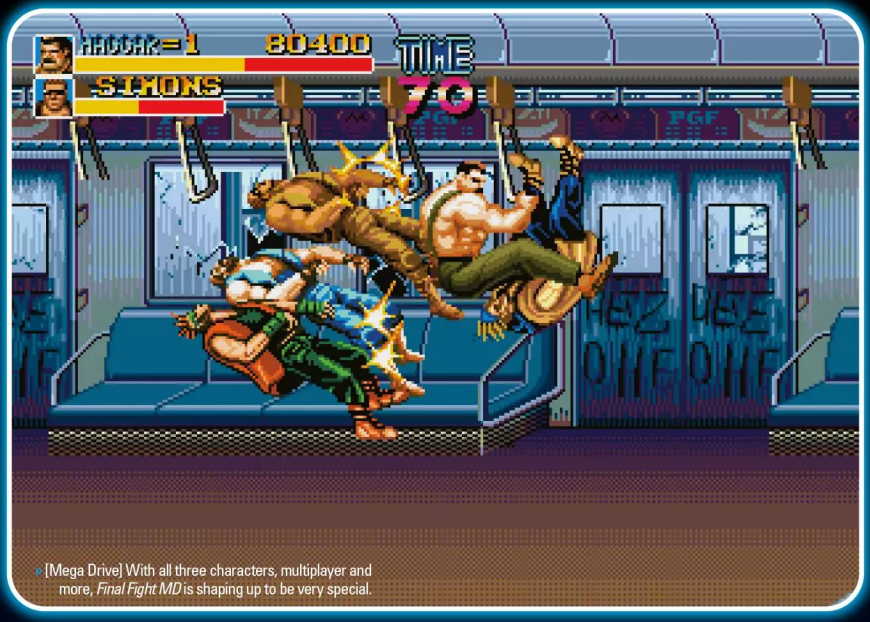
The Mega Drive did also find a role as a home for some early retro releases, such as the compilations *Arcade Classics* and *Williams Arcade's Greatest Hits*, and a conversion of *Frogger* that was the console's final official North American release. That wasn't the end of the story though, thanks to homebrew coders. As well as mods that improve existing conversions, they have blessed the console with brand-new ones of their own. "The modern resurgence of high-quality Mega Drive projects is largely thanks to Stephane Dallongeville's SGDK libraries. Coding in C with fast compile times and modern IDEs, along with an integrated asset pipeline, makes the development process much more efficient and enjoyable," Andrea tells us. He also explains that there are many advantages that today's programmers have. "The ease of testing ROMs in emulators, along with fewer barriers to file distribution, removes many of the limitations that developers faced in the past and even less friction than modern PC/Mac development. Today, even cart production costs are low enough to allow for maximum ROM usage and no need for cut content because of size restrictions." Andrea looked to the Mega Drive when seeking a

» [Mega Drive] *Super Street Fighter II* was the largest Mega Drive cartridge, at a titanic 40Mbit

platform with less restrictions than the Pico-8. "I discovered Pigsy's *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* videos and learned about SGDK, which seemed like a great way to progress, especially since I've always loved the Mega Drive." He had previously written a Pico-8 version of *R-Type*, so chose to create *Mega R-Type* – initially as a demo, but now as a full conversion. "Luckily, *R-Type* turned out to be a great fit for the Mega Drive hardware setup, the dual scroll planes and number of sprites are well suited to match the arcade. CPU power seems to be good, considering it's all coded in C and I am not that experienced and at this point there are almost no slowdown," Andrea tells us. "I don't have access to

» [Mega Drive] Limited cartridge capacity could really hamper some games, as *The Punisher* ably demonstrates.

» [Mega Drive] The hardware's limited colour palette really started to show in later games with digitised sprites.



» [Mega Drive] With all three characters, multiplayer and more, *Final Fight MD* is shaping up to be very special.

the original source code, so I'm taking the old-school route of playing it on MAME and studying YouTube footage to try to reverse-engineer the gameplay," says Andrea, who converted the graphics himself. "The music, however, is all original, composed by Cyberdeous and CLBN in Deflemask."

Mauro Xavier is working on *Final Fight MD*, a cartridge version of Capcom's beat-'em-up. "It was a proposal from Paulo (Master Linkuei), and I thought it would be interesting to take on the challenge," he says, explaining the project's origin. "Honestly, it was harder than I expected because I encountered many tough bugs to resolve. However, the process helped me better understand the console's architecture." Like Andrea, he has written brand-new source code based on observation of the original game. "As for graphics, about 90% of the sprites were taken from the arcade version and adjusted pixel by pixel for proportion. The other 10% came from the Mega-CD version, where I made adjustments to remove dithering," he explains. Backgrounds likewise consist of tweaked assets from both versions. "One aspect I appreciate about *Final Fight* for the Mega Drive is the music. Edmo Caldas is a

MODERN MARVELS

FIVE FANTASTIC CONVERSIONS FROM THE 21ST CENTURY

SHINOBI

TRYPHON

This conversion of the first game in Sega's ninja action series has been in development since at least 2015, and while it's still incomplete, what's there feels exceptionally authentic. Work is ongoing, with the developer Tryphon recently displaying progress in implementing the first two boss fights.

DARIUS: EXTRA VERSION

HIDECADE/M2

While the Mega Drive can't replicate the ultra-wide display of an original *Darius* cabinet, it does a great job with the gameplay within its own constraints. First released on the Mega Drive Mini in 2019, the game eventually received a Taito-endorsed cartridge release via Strictly Limited Games.

FANTASY ZONE

HIDECADE/M2

Sega's System 16 cute-'em-up seems to be a favourite at M2, and this faithful conversion is exclusive to the Mega Drive Mini II. As well as a Time Attack mode, a new Super Easy mode gives players loads of money and a life bar, to make the challenge less intense.

REAL BOUT FATAL FURY GENESIS

RHEOGAMER BR

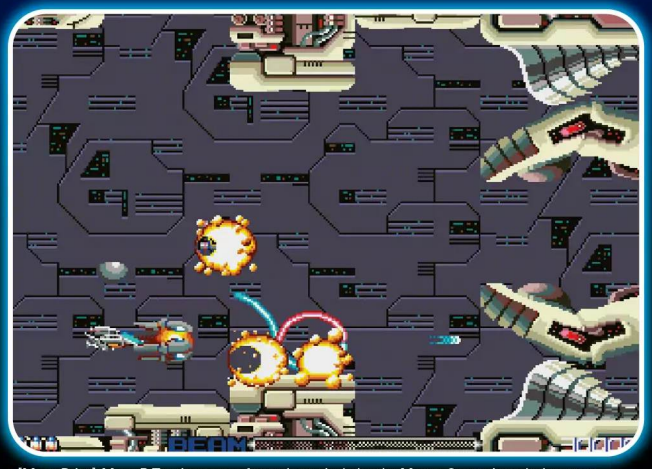
This adaptation of *Real Bout Fatal Fury Special* looks and feels close to the Neo Geo original. The trade-off is that there are only nine individual characters in the 40Mbit ROM, but five EX versions, a Survivor mode and a list of Conquests should keep you busy.

WINDJAMMERS

FORMAT_C

The public release of this Neo Geo conversion is quite old now, but progress updates from format_c and the team have been fairly regular. As part of the lengthy development process, the developers are going beyond Data East's classic multiplayer design by adding brand-new courts and characters.

» [Mega Drive] *Vigilante* is in an early state, but so far it's clear that the visuals have been nailed.



» [Mega Drive] *Mega R-Type* is great so far, and even includes the Master System's exclusive stage.

talented composer and musician, and his arrangements gave the tracks a special touch without losing their essence," Mauro tells us. Although still in progress, it's already a highly polished conversion that looks set to eclipse the Mega-CD version.

Fabrice was initially put off of SGDK because of bad high school memories of C programming. "What got me to step into SGDK was the help of Vetea, the creator of *Papi Commando*," he explains. "He was coding the Mega Drive *Metal Slug* demo at the time, and he very kindly gave me the source code. That's been a very precious help and I decided to learn C." Now working on a conversion of *Vigilante*, Fabrice is also going by observation. He ripped the graphics for the game via emulation. "All five levels are identical to the arcade, apart from level one. That one is too rich visually to fit into VRAM, even by streaming tiles, so I had to do some minor cut-downs. For the sprites I have been very, very lucky. The colour adaptation has been made by the mighty Pyron, an artist very well known in the Mega Drive homebrew scene. He kindly proposed to do the colour conversion for the sprites, and boy, how beautiful it is," he enthuses. "The music is being remade by Vector Orbitex. I don't know how he does it, but the tunes are quite difficult to distinguish from the arcade originals. The sound quality is amazing."

"WHAT GOT ME TO STEP INTO SGDK WAS THE HELP OF VETEA, THE CREATOR OF PAPI COMMANDO"
FABRICE FERNANDEZ

he continued appetite for arcade conversions among Mega Drive fans has even stimulated officially licensed releases in recent years. At the most basic end, you have Retro-Bit manufacturing new cartridge runs of classic conversions like *Grind Stormer* and *Slap Fight MD*. Then there are the Mega Drive Mini consoles, which hosted brand-new official versions of games including *Tetris*, *Fantasy Zone*, *Spatter* and *Puyo Puyo Sun*, and even a version of *Space Harrier* that simulates a fantasy version of the Mega Drive with sprite scaling. The conversion of *Darius* that appeared on the original machine even received a cartridge release, licensed by Taito.

There may be far more to the Mega Drive library than its arcade games, and there's no denying that the PC Engine and SNES also had their share of great conversions. However, it's fair to say that more than either of those machines, the Mega Drive's accomplishments were built upon a foundation of arcade excellence. Fire up any of the brilliant conversions we've highlighted, and the differences from the arcade originals quickly fade into insignificance – what matters is that the gameplay shines through and the spirit is intact. If you've ever found yourself with a fistful of 10p coins and a dilemma as to which machine you'll take them to first, the arcade soul of this machine is as irresistibly attractive as it always was. ✱

» [Mega Drive] *Virtua Fighter 2* was far too ambitious for its own good, and came off badly.

» [Mega Drive] *Frogger* arrived in 1998, which seems like an unfathomable publishing choice in hindsight.

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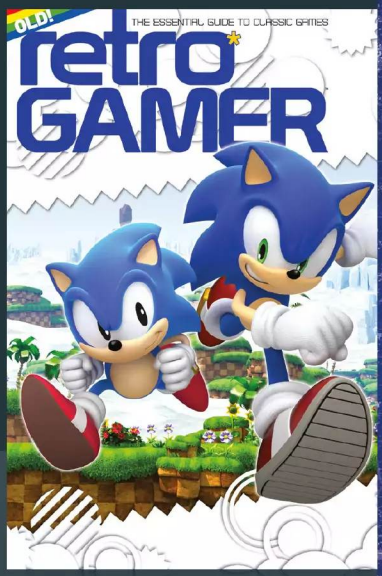

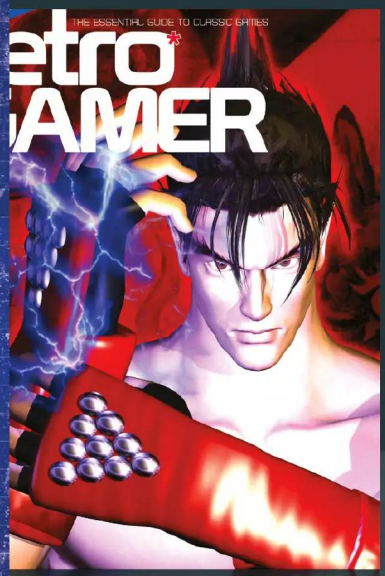

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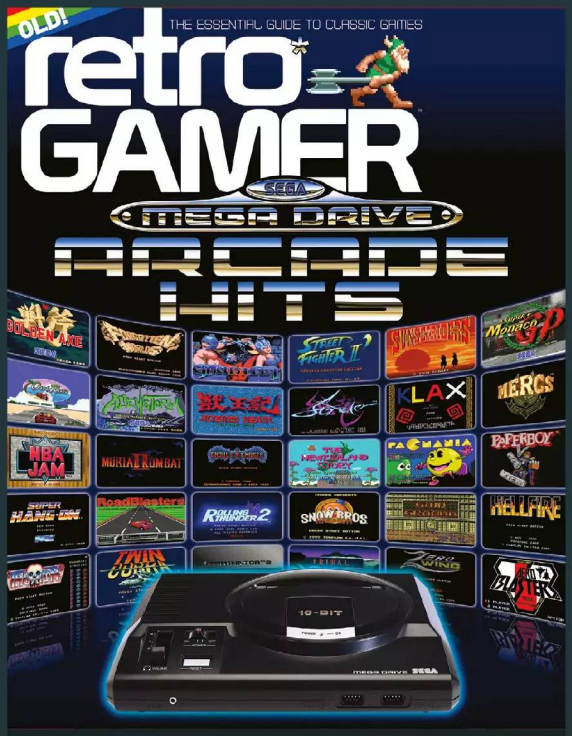

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ULTIMATE GUIDE

JETPAC

LONG BEFORE THE REPUTATION AND MYSTIQUE SURROUNDING ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME HAD FORMED, BEFORE THOSE SPECIAL BOXES AND FILMATION, THERE WAS SIMPLY JETPAC – AND AS WAYS TO START AN INFLUENTIAL GAMING LEGACY GOES, IT'S A MIGHTY FINE ONE

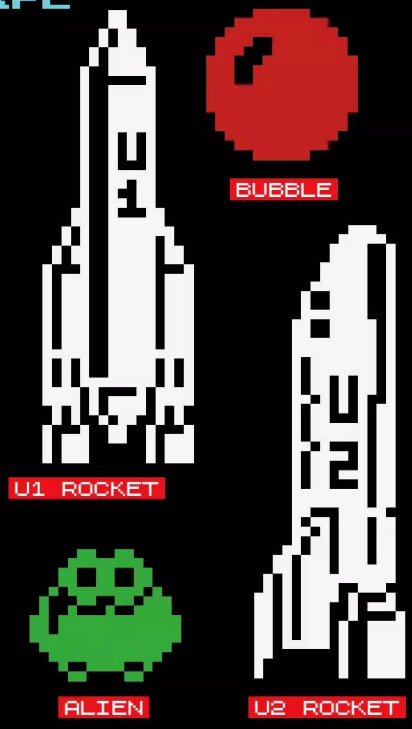
WORDS BY NICK THORPE

The small town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch is a funny place to imagine an overnight game-development success taking place, and yet in the early Eighties, that's exactly what happened. Or at least, that's the way it seemed, because the truth was that brothers Tim and Chris Stamper had already spent time designing arcade games. So while the first game that bore the name of *Ultimate Play The Game* wasn't quite a debut, *Jetpac* was a powerful statement of intent to ZX Spectrum owners, from a company that would gain an amazing reputation for quality games and secretive development practices, and eventually lead to the establishment of Rare.

Jetpac is a single-screen shoot-'em-up in which you take control of Jetman, whose goal in each stage is to escape to the next stage via a rocket. As the title implies, Jetman is equipped with a jetpack that allows him to travel freely around the screen, with his movement being faster in the air than when he's walking on the ground. He can fire a long, *Defender*-style shot at enemies to the left or right, depending on the direction he's facing, and it's vital to either dodge or destroy them, as Jetman is a fragile chap who dies with a single touch.

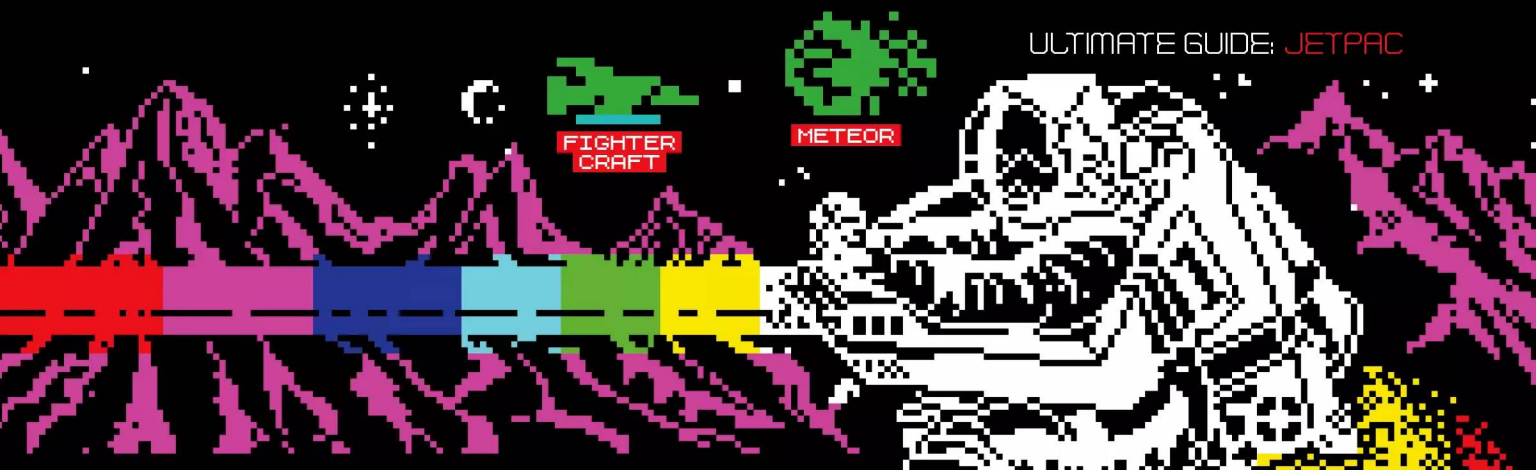
Getting out of the first stage requires you to first build your rocket, assembling it from parts that are scattered around the stage. Once you manage that, you've then got to fuel it by dropping fuel cells into it, on which you finally board and take off for the next challenge. Each stage brings new enemies with differing movement patterns, but fortunately, you'll only need to refuel your rocket, rather than building a new one – at least for a few stages, after which you'll have to build a new, upgraded model. With four stages for each of the four rockets, a full game of *Jetpac* lasts for 16 stages, after which it loops back to the first stage.

While this sounds like fairly standard fare for an arcade shooter of the era, what made *Jetpac* stand out was its technical quality. 1983 was very early in the life of the ZX Spectrum, and Ultimate had not only made a game that offered detailed sprites while minimising colour clash, but did so with a level of smooth



» [ZX Spectrum] All your rocket parts are placed at the beginning of a game – no waiting around.

» [ZX Spectrum] We're hard at work reassembling our rocket, so we can start fuelling it.



» [ZX Spectrum] Success! See you losers later, we're off to plunder another planet now.

» [ZX Spectrum] As the rocket is filled with fuel, it steadily becomes more magenta.

CONVERSION CAPERS

JETPAC DIDN'T GET MANY OFFICIAL CONVERSIONS. HOW DID IT FARE AWAY FROM ITS HOME PLATFORM?

VIC-20

1983

■ The version for Commodore's machine generally looks pretty close to the Spectrum original, although you'll notice the complete absence of the floor that the rocket is supposed to be sitting on. The audio is a bit meatier than the Sinclair computer is capable of, too, so the sound effects are rather nicer. Unfortunately, the gameplay doesn't feel like it has the same delicate balance – enemies feel a bit more numerous and aggressive. There are also only two rockets to build, rather than four, as in the Spectrum original. Still, it's an impressive outing for the VIC.

BBC MICRO

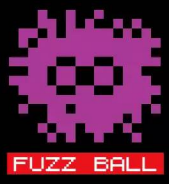
1984

■ This version of *Jetpac* is very colourful – in fact, maybe too colourful, as everything looks just a little gaudy. However, there's a serious bump up in terms of the audio presentation, with a neat little tune that plays before the start of each game and some cool spot effects for the shots and explosions. Sadly, like the VIC-20 version, it feels just a bit off in terms of the balance of the enemies – early stages that gave us no trouble on the Speccy felt rather brutal on your school's preferred computer. It's fun, but doesn't match the original.

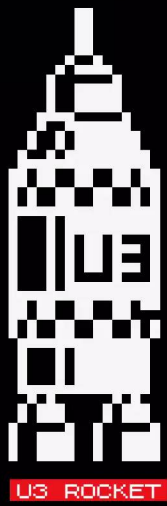
AND THE REST...

■ *Jetpac* has shown up in a few places since its heyday, with the most unusual being as an emulated bonus game inside *Donkey Kong 64*. You'll need to earn 5,000 points in the game to claim the Rareware coin, which is essential to facing the final boss. If that seems like too much pressure, *Jetpac* is also included on the original ZX Spectrum Vega plug-and-play console. However, by far the easiest way to play the game today is via the brilliant *Rare Replay* for the Xbox One and its successors, which also includes *Lunar Jetman*, *Solar Jetman*, and *Jetpac Refuelled*.

» [ZX Spectrum] It's easy to see what we mean about the lasers' resemblance to those in *Defender*.



» [ZX Spectrum] Jetman is faster in the air than he is on the ground, so use that knowledge wisely.



» [ZX Spectrum] All of the obvious escape routes are blocked, so run left and wrap around.

» [ZX Spectrum] It's not hard to cover both sides from attack, as the controls are very responsive.

» [ZX Spectrum] These enemies are patient, waiting for a while before making straight runs at you.

» [ZX Spectrum] The only down note about *Jetpac* is that while enemies change, the stage layout doesn't.

BOOST YOUR PERFORMANCE

WRAP IT UP

■ Enemies spawn from the edges of the screen, so one good trick while you're waiting is to park yourself in the top-right of the screen and fire right. You'll cover both sides of the screen as your fire wraps around and be protected from threats below by the platform.

TAKE IT DOWN

■ New fuel won't spawn until existing fuel has been added to your rocket. However, if Jetman drops the fuel from above, it will fall less quickly than Jetman could, so bring it down yourself to reduce the time you have to spend defending yourself between fuel drops.

STAY OFF THE GROUND

■ If Jetman is walking around on the ground, he's slower than if he's in the air. However, if you pull down on the joystick, he'll hover in place and can move from left to right. Use this to your advantage by staying just off the ground for enhanced speed.

» [ZX Spectrum] Flying saucers are smart, and will chase Jetman around the screen very directly.

» [ZX Spectrum] Enemies can't pass through the platforms, so Jetman is momentarily safe here.

movement that was uncommon for not only the Spectrum, but home-computer games in general. More than that, it was a breeze to control on both the keyboard and via Kempston joystick. It may not have been a translation of an arcade game, but *Jetpac* delivered the kind of experience you expected of one in the comfort of your own home.

In fact, you could even have the instant accessibility of the arcade if you fancied it, as *Jetpac* was one of the scant few games released as a ROM cartridge for the ZX Interface 2. This gave the benefit of instant loading, with the trade-off being that you'd have to use the keyboard controls since the add-on's joystick ports weren't Kempston-compatible. It was also an expensive proposition at £14.95 on top of the cost of the ZX Interface 2, compared to £5.50 for the cassette version. On the plus side, budget-conscious Spectrum owners who had opted for the 16K model were able to join in the fun with Ultimate's game.

Jetpac was widely acclaimed by the press upon its launch in 1983. *Computer & Video Games* felt that it was a "very playable, addictive and original arcade-type game" with "well thought-out" keyboard controls, and gave it 9/10 scores for getting started, value and playability. *ZX Computing* felt that it was an "excellent program and game" and felt that the "characters are beautifully designed and colour is used very well indeed". *TV Gamer* gave the cartridge release scores of 4/5 for graphics and gameplay, 3/5 for value and 1/5 for sound, and praised it for having "both good graphics and a fairly original plot". By contrast, *Your Computer* felt that the "scenario is not entirely convincing but it makes for a good game".

Jetpac was the start of major critical and commercial success for Ultimate, which sold 330,000 copies of the game. At the first-ever Golden Joystick Awards in 1983, *Jetpac* claimed the Game Of The Year award, and Ultimate took Software House Of The Year. It still holds up very well too, so whether you fancy the old rubber-keyed experience or loading the game up on an Xbox, we'd recommend you revisit *Jetpac*, and see how Ultimate first took flight. ✱

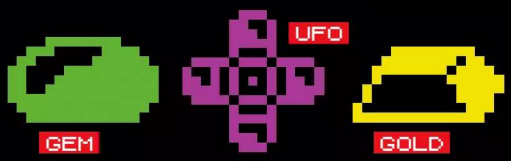
SEND YOUR SCORES ROCKETING WITH THESE PLAYING TIPS

KNOW THE ENEMY

■ Some of your enemies are resilient, and will bounce off of platforms without issue. Some of your enemies are smart, and will chase you pretty directly. However, some of the others will happily dash themselves against the platforms trying to chase you – learn which ones for an advantage.

KEEP IT FOCUSSED

■ While score items can be tempting, you'll get an extra life after every four stages. If you've got the choice between getting fuel or leaving the stage and picking up that shiny trinket, we suggest you leave the treasure alone – an extra life will boost your score far higher.



LUNAR LEGACY

JETMAN'S ADVENTURES DIDN'T STOP IN 1983 – HERE'S WHAT HE DID NEXT

LUNAR JETMAN

1983

■ Expanding on the concept of *Jetpac*, *Lunar Jetman* tasks our hero with traversing a larger scrolling play area, using bombs to blow up bases. In order to do this, he needs to alternate between his trusty jetpack and a moon buggy. The former is fast and not restricted, but has limited fuel and leaves Jetman vulnerable, while the latter shields him but is slow and can't handle rough terrain. Like its predecessor, *Lunar Jetman* was acclaimed, and did well for Ultimate.

SOLAR JETMAN

1990

■ This NES game further explored the concepts of the previous games. Now hunting for the fabled Golden Warpship, Jetman pilots though some inhospitable environments. The gameplay now resembles that of games like *Lunar Lander* and *Thrust*, with tricky manoeuvres required to safely escape with your precious cargo as it drags you down and alters your very relationship with gravity. Unfortunately, it didn't sell well, and planned home-computer versions never saw the light of day as a result.

JETPAC REFUELLED

2007

■ The most recent entry in the series launched as an Xbox Live Arcade game for Xbox 360, and revisits and expands the gameplay of the original game. Beyond the major audiovisual upgrade, there are new stage layouts, weapon power-ups, a boost mechanic, and bombs. Local and online multiplayer also allows players to see who can build and fuel their ship first. This update includes the original *Jetpac*, and is still available on modern Xbox consoles due to backwards compatibility.

QuickShot Python 1

» **PLATFORM:** Various » **YEAR:** 1991
» **COST:** £9.99 (launch), £13+ (today, boxed), £10+ (today, unboxed)

A player should never be without a good joystick, and the Quickshot Python 1 aimed to fulfil that role for players across a variety of systems. The wide base gives a little space to rest either your left or right hand and has four suction cups intended to provide stability. The stick itself has an ergonomic design including finger grips, as well as a wide head that undoubtedly inspired the name of the product and gives some space to rest your thumb. If you're using the QuickShot 1M variant, the stick is even microswitched, which is a nice touch.

The Python 1 was compatible with a variety of different systems thanks to its DB-9 connector and two-button design. A switch on the underside determines the compatibility mode of the device, offering Atari and Commodore, MSX, Amstrad and Sega as options. That versatility, as well as the reasonable price and widespread availability of the joystick, made it a popular peripheral that is still easy to find today – just make sure that it's tested if you're buying one, because opinions on their reliability differ. ✱

ESSENTIAL GAME

Turrican

Blimey, one game across a whole variety of different platforms, and it's a standard joystick too. That doesn't really narrow down our options a great deal, does it? In that case, we might as well just give you something excellent to play, and in that case why not revisit this magnificent run-and-gun? It's as good as the day it emerged from the mind of Manfred Trenz, and you can play it on a few of the different systems this joystick supports – but we've chosen the Commodore 64 original, of course.

QuickShot Python 1 fact

■ The Python design was used for a variety of other systems too, with other versions including the NES compatible Python 2 and the Mega Drive compatible Python 3.

A TRIBUTE TO

ACTIVISION

THE ATARI 2600 YEARS

SET UP BY FORMER ATARI DEVELOPERS IN 1979, ACTIVISION DEFINED THE ATARI 2600 WITH HITS LIKE KABOOM!, PITFALL! AND RIVER RAID. FOUNDER DAVID CRANE REVISITS THE GROUNDBREAKING 2600 TITLES THAT HE WORKED ON AT THE CELEBRATED STUDIO

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

DAVID CRANE

Arguably Activision's most accomplished 2600 developer, David Crane overcame the system's limitations to create titles like *Pitfall!* and *Grand Prix*. He later worked on other systems, but returned to the 2600 in 1987 with *Skate Boardin'*. He still designs games, and acts as an expert witness in patent and copyright cases.

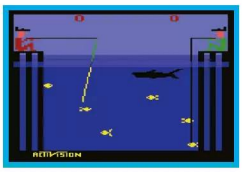
From its 1979 inception and for its first few years in business, Activision's focus was on crafting games for the Atari 2600. The firm's 1980 2600 output included a fun slalom sim called *Skiing* and David Crane's popular racing game *Dragster*. The firm's 2600 games for 1981 included Larry Kaplan's bomb-defusing twitch challenge *Kaboom!* and David's road-crossing title *Freeway*.

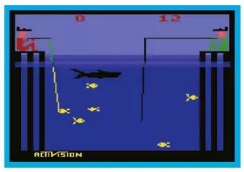
1982 was a big year for both the 2600 and Activision, with 2600 releases like David's technically impressive *Grand Prix* selling well, and 2600 originals *Pitfall!* and *River Raid* selling in their millions. David's *Pitfall!* also had the honour of being one of, if not the, first arcade adventure.

In terms of quantity, Activision's 2600 development peaked in 1983. Some of its best games for the system that year included the *Defender* homage *Chopper Command*, the burger-building game *Pressure Cooker*, the cops and robbers title *Keystone Kapers* and David's joystick-destroying *Decathlon*.

As the US games crash took hold in 1984, the studio's support for the 2600 waned, with the miner rescue action title *HERO* and David's *Pitfall II* being the company's 2600 standouts for the year.

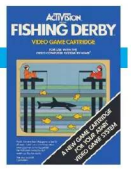
A 2600 version of *Ghostbusters* arrived in 1985, and between 1987 and 1989 the firm graced the console with *Skate Boardin'*, several Imagic re-releases and coin-op conversions. Since then, Activision 2600 compilations have been released from time to time, proving that despite tech advances, its greatest hits for the console never get old. ✱





FISHING DERBY

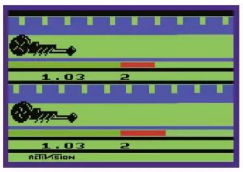
1980

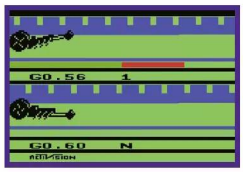


■ *Fishing Derby*'s appeal comes from its layers. Both players can't reel in a fish simultaneously, once caught the fish wriggle madly, and its shark is unpredictable.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

Fishing Derby was a technical experiment turned into a game. Inspired by an aquarium, I created a bunch of goldfish limited to bands of depth in the water. I was also experimenting with a sloping line algorithm for a fishing line. Only one fish could be reeled in at a time, giving preference to the first player to hook one. This added a bit of drama, but didn't add enough gameplay, so the shark was added to provide a threat. With those features combined, it became a compelling and entertaining game."





DRAGSTER

1980

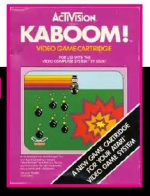
■ Essentially, *Dragster* is a test of changing gears at just the right speeds to maximise acceleration. Shaving seconds off your time doing so is a compelling proposition.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

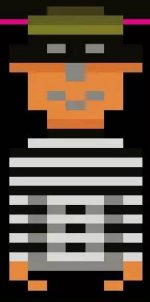
Dragster was a homage to the *Drag Race* arcade game produced under Atari's Kee Games brand. If you didn't have a friend to play with, you could hone your skills by racing to improve your time. I grew up in the rural Midwestern US, and we were somewhat obsessed with 'souping-up' our cars to achieve the lowest times. *Drag Race* had a steering wheel, accelerator, and gear shift. All I had was a four-position joystick with a single fire button. Figuring out how to control *Dragster* with that was my crowning achievement there."

KABOOM!

1981



■ Although catching and defusing falling bombs may seem humdrum, when this happens at speed in *Kaboom!* it represents the very purest form of twitch gaming.



DAVID'S MEMORIES

Larry Kaplan loved Atari's *Avalanche*, so he made a similar game on the Atari 2600 with *Pong*-like balls dropping from the ceiling to be caught by *Pong*-like paddles. It was fabulous – by far the best twitch game ever made for the 2600, but it was a giant leap backwards graphically. Activision was recognised as having the best-looking games in the business, and we wanted Larry's game to reach that graphic standard. So I added the Mad Bomber dropping bombs instead of *Pong* balls, and water buckets to catch and extinguish them in place of *Pong* paddles. For fun I gave him facial expressions based on the gameplay."

MANIC MECHANICS

HOW TO BEAT THE FAST AND FURIOUS BOMB-DISPOSAL GAME

CAREFUL CATCHING

■ Catching the Mad Bomber's explosives is initially simple, but as the levels go by, and more fall faster, correctly positioning your buckets becomes increasingly tricky.

SPEED FREAK

■ Since the Mad Bomber has superhuman speed, it follows that you can move your buckets equally fast. Of course, this makes over and undershooting your targets an issue.

BOUNTIFUL BOMBS

■ Not only does the Mad Bomber drop increasing amounts of bombs, but he also drops them in increasingly awkward to follow patterns, meaning you never get to stand still.

BUCKET LIST

■ *Kaboom!* gives you three buckets. You might imagine just one bomb going off would dissuade you from catching more, but it takes three successive explosions to do that!

KEEPING SCORE

■ It's rather bleak, but the Mad Bomber always wins in *Kaboom!*. Your only solace is to beat your previous score, which you rack up by catching more bombs than last time.

FREEWAY

1981

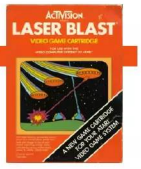
■ You get a point in *Freeway* every time you get your chicken across a busy motorway within a time limit. It's indestructible, but it gets knocked back if it gets hit, which slows you down.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

Freeway originally featured two human figures racing across ten lanes of traffic. Hitting a car would bounce them back a couple of lanes, or all the way back in Expert Mode. I was proud of the gameplay, but I never liked the look of the human figures. In a brainstorming session our CEO Jim Levy steered the discussion around to the grade school riddle 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' The discussion quickly turned to making the player avatars into chickens, and using that theme for the packaging and TV commercials. Levy then added, 'We could even hire a man in a chicken suit to dance around the trade-show floor at CES."

LASER BLAST

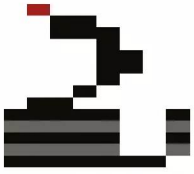
1981



■ In a reversal of shooters like *Space Invaders*, *Laser Blast* has you firing down at ground-based cannons from a UFO. In another twist, if you're hit you can steer your damaged craft into your opponents.

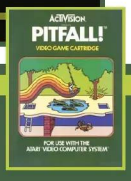
DAVID'S MEMORIES

Laser Blast was created at a time when there were a lot of other space-themed games on the market. Every Activision game designer was also a game player. We would hang around arcades, playing every new game that came out. There was an ironic side effect of that; we got tired of playing each generation of games long before most players. That drove us to innovate rather than copy. Ground-based blasters shooting up at incoming targets had been done to death, so why not have a highly manoeuvrable flying saucer shooting lasers at armed, ground-based defenders?"



PITFALL!

1982



■ Not only does *Pitfall!* brilliantly adapt the dangers of a jungle into compelling mechanics, but it also delivers hundreds of connected levels on a system designed for single-screen games.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

Most games took place on a single screen. I wanted to improve on game realism, such as putting a realistic human figure in a game with realistic physics, and while I was at it I would exceed the single-screen design. I designed a side-view game such that when the player ran off the right side of the screen he reappeared on the left. But I realised that if I relied on ROM the world could only be about 16 screens wide, so I created a method of algorithmically generating the screens. With that technology I could make the jungle 256 screens wide."

FUN FEATURES WHY THE SYSTEM-DEFINING TITLE IS SO COMPELLING

EPIC EXPLORATION

■ Not only is *Pitfall!* vast in comparison to most earlier games, but its multiple single-screen stages can be revisited after exiting them rather than playing through them in sequential order.

COOL CHALLENGES

■ Campfires have to be leapt over, tar pits and rivers have to be swung over using vines or run over if temporarily dry, and still and rolling barrels have to be jumped over and run away from.

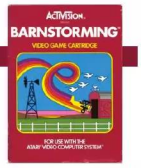
AWESOME ADVERSARIES

■ The cobras in *Pitfall!* are stationary, making them easier to jump over than the scorpions, which pace around. You can also use crocodiles as stepping stones over rivers, as long as their mouths are shut.

TREASURE HUNT

■ Diamond rings are worth the most points, with gold, silver and money bags being worth decreasingly less. They're all above ground, but finding some requires the use of underground shortcuts.

BARNSTORMING



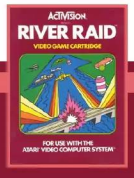
1982

The challenge set by *Barnstorming* is to fly through a series of barns in a biplane in the shortest time possible. Obstructions include windmills that you fly over and geese that you have to manoeuvre past.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

Steve Cartwright was a friend from college, and when looking to expand the game designer pool at Activision I vouched for him. He was hired, but I was told he was my responsibility if he screwed up. After a period of training, his first game was *Barnstorming*. One of the more difficult tasks when trying to make a game fun to play is how to reward a player for getting better. Steve did a great job of creating patterns of geese to navigate, while also penalising the player for bumping into them. Not only did you lose time, the pattern also changed and affected the rest of your run. Better players realised that if you learned and timed the pattern you could achieve a better time."

RIVER RAID



1982

It's not immediately obvious where Carol Shaw took inspiration from when she designed *River Raid* just by looking at it, but once you know that she wanted to make a shooter with a continually scrolling screen thanks to playing *Scramble* the origins of her 2600 title's mechanics become clearer. In other respects, the two games couldn't be any more different. *Scramble* is a side-scrolling shoot-'em-up, whereas *River Raid* scrolls vertically. *Scramble* has mountains, cave systems and skyscrapers; by comparison, *River Raid* has an endless stretch of water. Aside from differentiating itself visually from *Scramble*, *River Raid* gives you different weapons. In *Scramble* you get a front-firing gun and bombs that fall downwards, but in *River Raid* you just have forward-firing missiles. Depending on which mode you select, these either travel in a straight trajectory or are guided to their target. *River Raid* also distinguishes itself from Konami's coin-op with its approach to fuel. In *Scramble*, you accumulate fuel by shooting it, but in *River Raid* you fly over fuel to collect it, and only shoot at supplies you don't need.

FLIGHT TRAINING A GUIDE TO THE SUPERB SCROLLING SHOOTER

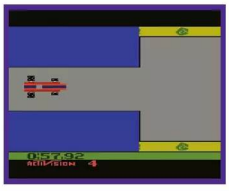
MAIN MISSION
Accumulate points by destroying as many enemies and bridges as possible before your last jet crashes or runs out of fuel.

ASSORTED ADVERSARIES
As well as helicopters and tankers, you have to destroy your opposition's bridges and any fuel depots you don't need.

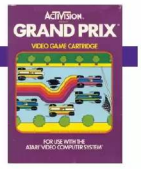
FINITE FUEL
You need a balanced approach to *River Raid*'s fuel; you need enough for your jet but can destroy the rest for points, so keep that in mind.

BANKING CRISIS
Unlike in real life, flying over the banks in *River Raid* makes your jet explode, so don't ever stray from the river.

REASONABLE RESTARTS
Instead of returning to the beginning of the river if your jet blows-up, you instead restart at the last bridge you took out.



GRAND PRIX



1982

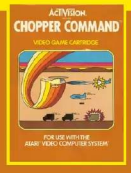
Doing well in *Grand Prix* depends on dealing with everything that's thrown at you while driving as fast as you dare. As well as rivals and oil slicks there are precariously narrow bridges.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

I consider *Grand Prix* to be the crowning technical achievement of all my Atari 2600 games. The Atari 2600 was designed to display two single-colour 8-bit objects, whereas the cars in *Grand Prix* were 32 bits wide and very colourful. The computer threw opposing cars at you using a repeatable pseudo-random sequence. The best score had the end of the course bumping you into the very last car to shift the pattern enough to squeeze through, which increased your time. I wanted to squeeze through without bumping the car. After about 50 tries I was able to, which shaved a couple of seconds off my time. My euphoria was short-lived, as that gave the computer time to throw another car directly in front of me! After 50 more tries I slipped through the gap and immediately changed lanes to dodge that new car and set the fastest time ever recorded."

CHOPPER COMMAND

1983



You can't review *Chopper Command* without acknowledging its debt to *Defender*. There are certainly similarities, but the 2600 title doesn't have an equivalent mechanic to the aliens in the Williams coin-op's turning hostages into hostile mutants. There are no smart bombs or hyperspace either, and *Chopper Command* takes place over a flat desert plain rather than above the surface of a mountainous world. In terms of enemies, there are two different types in the 2600 shooter: jets and helicopters, compared to *Defender*'s five plus mutants. All of this makes *Chopper Command* more of a straightforward shoot-'em-up than its arcade inspiration, but that's not to say that it doesn't add features of its own. Most notable is that enemy missiles split in two, with one half shooting upwards and the other rocketing downwards towards the trucks you're safeguarding.

HELICOPTER HEAVEN

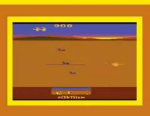
NOTABLE ASPECTS OF THE INTENSE SHOOT-'EM-UP

PROTECTION DUTY

A key part of *Chopper Command*'s challenge lies in protecting trucks. After destroying waves of enemies you get points for those you've kept safe.

DIRECTIONAL DILEMMA

Because *Chopper Command* has a wraparound playfield, you can be attacked from both sides. In addition, enemy aircraft can change direction on a dime.



WAVE LENGTHS

Each level in *Chopper Command* continues until you've taken out its entire wave of foes. Enemy helicopters are worth 100 points and jets get you 200.

HANDY SCANNER

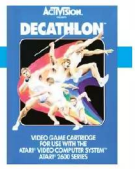
Even when your chopper is the only vehicle on-screen you can tell where your opponents and the trucks you're defending are by looking at the radar, which is very handy.

LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE

You start with three choppers and lose one if you're shot down or collide with a foe or truck. However, you can get an extra life for each 10,000 points scored.

DECATHLON

1983



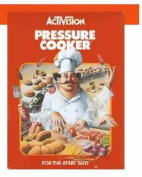
Decathlon's purity of gameplay means that its ten events largely test your ability to rapidly waggle the joystick to build-up and maintain speed. Clearing obstacles and throwing items requires timed button presses.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

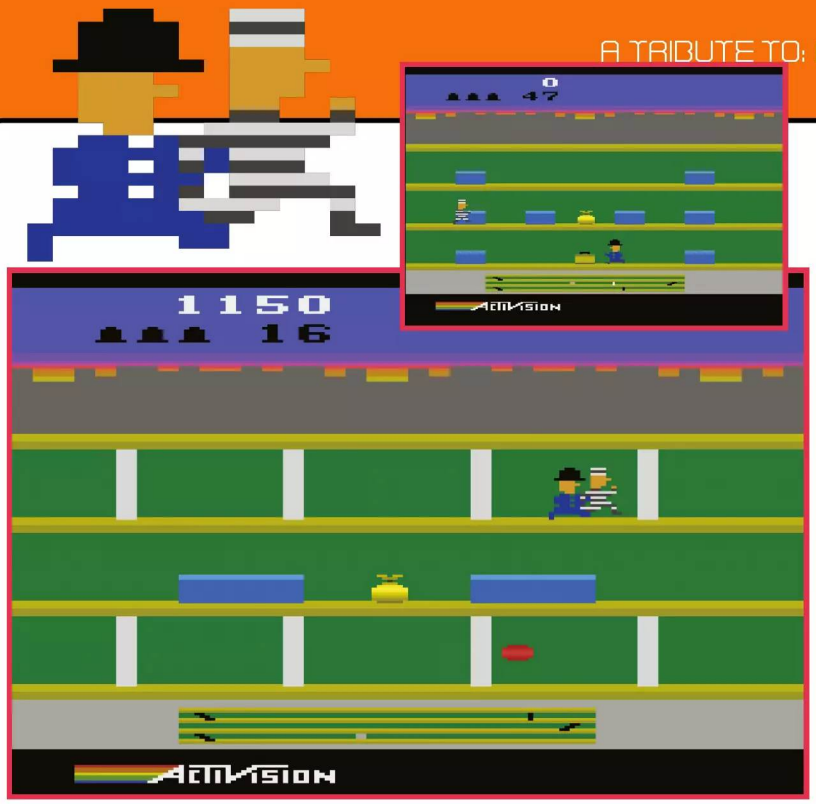
I chose to develop *Decathlon* because the Olympics were coming to Los Angeles the following year, 1984. There were many challenges to making the game, not least putting ten games into one game cartridge. I greatly improved on the Pitfall Harry animations, creating a larger and more colourful character. I used the other Atari 2600 objects to display such things as the hurdles, javelin, discus and vaulting pole. I prided myself on realism in 2600 games, so I obtained a book of the rules and scoring of the decathlon and built the game to precisely follow those. Most people remember *Decathlon* for wearing out your arms and breaking joysticks. I prefer to think of it as the first videogame that also gave the player a physical workout."

PRESSURE COOKER

1983

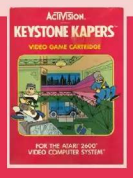


If *Pressure Cooker* is anything like working in a real-life burger bar then it's a wonder they can get any staff! The chef you control has to put specific toppings on burgers, add the top half of a bun and then take them to the wrapping machine. It sounds straightforward, but a number of things get in the way of this otherwise simple process. There's a food dispenser that fires out toppings, and it doesn't always provide you with the ingredients you need. Any extras have to be bounced back to it. The burgers you have to top are on a conveyor belt, and if they reach the end they fall off and are ruined. Then there's the wrapping machine, which wraps the burgers in different coloured packaging depending on their toppings, and you have to drop your burgers down the right chute or lose points.



KEYSTONE KAPERS

1983



■ You could just about get away with calling *Keystone Kapers* a platformer, in that you have to guide police officer Keystone Kelly up and down the floors of a department store in pursuit of shoplifter Harry Hooligan. There's a fair bit of jumping to be done, although never to or from platforms. Instead you have to leap over projectile-like consumer goods and shopping trolleys. In place of platforms, you instead depend on lifts and escalators to get to higher-up areas. Chasing down and catching Harry before he ascends to the roof of the store is your primary objective, after which you get awarded points for the time remaining on a countdown. There's also a secondary objective of collecting objects that are lying around the store having been lost by customers, such as bags of money and suitcases. Doing so adds more points to your tally, and since *Keystone Kapers* has no ending, improving your high score is your only way of showing your skill at playing the compelling cops and robbers title.

A FAIR COP TOP TIPS ON ARRESTING HARRY HOOLIGAN

ONWARDS & UPWARDS

■ The elevators in *Keystone Kapers* move slowly, but they visit every floor, whereas the escalators move quickly but only go up a single level.

MAP QUEST

■ Because *Keystone Kapers* spans several horizontally laid out screens, Hooligan Harry is often off-screen, which makes the game's radar very handy.

DODGING DANGERS

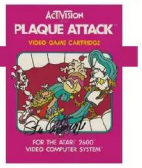
■ Failing to leap over beach balls and shopping trolleys costs you time in *Keystone Kapers*, but not ducking under toy planes is a fatal error.

LIFE GOALS

■ You begin *Keystone Kapers* with two spare lives, but you lose one when the countdown hits zero, Harry reaches the roof or you hit a toy plane.

PLAQUE ATTACK

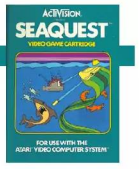
1983



■ Perhaps the only dental hygiene-related videogame, *Plaque Attack* is often unfairly described as a *Space Invaders* derivative. The only aspect of that comparison that holds true is that it's a fixed-screen shooter with stationary targets that your opponents can cause damage to. Otherwise, *Plaque Attack* is an entirely original title. You control a tube of toothpaste that squirts short bursts of minty paste at food that falls downwards or rises upwards towards a set of teeth. These foodstuffs can't harm your tube, but they turn individual teeth yellow and then disintegrate them if not blasted with toothpaste before or soon after they make contact. Once you destroy a wave of food a new wave appears with a different attack pattern from the last. Points are scored for blasting edibles, and bonus teeth are awarded once you reach set scores, but if all the teeth get eroded then it's game over.

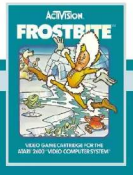
SEAQUEST

1983



■ If you picture *Defender* with a fixed screen instead of scrolling, and some tweaks to its mechanics, then you get a decent idea about how *Seaquest* plays. Instead of a spaceship you pilot a submarine, rather than rescuing colonists you pick-up divers looking for gold and in place of aliens you find yourself being attacked by enemy subs and sharks. Thankfully, these opponents leave the divers alone, it's only your craft that gets fired upon and assaulted by hostile marine life, although you can combat these threats with a never-ending supply of torpedoes. Unfortunately, *Seaquest* presents you with a number of other unpleasant conditions of play. You have limited oxygen onboard your vessel, and once it runs low you have to surface to replenish it. If you happen to have rescued six divers at this point then you move onto the next level, but if not then you lose one diver. Worse still, if you're foolish enough to surface with no divers your craft explodes!

FROSTBITE



1983

Frostbite is arguably Steve Cartwright's best 2600 title. While at Activision, he had an uncanny knack of identifying what made existing videogames so much fun to play. With *Frostbite*, he combined aspects of both *Q*bert* and *Frogger* along with some fresh ideas of his own. The end result sees you changing the colour of floating ice blocks in order to build an igloo while avoiding the attentions of local wildlife. The frozen cubes move in opposite directions, like the detritus in the ponds in *Frogger*, and animals swim and fly alongside them. These push you into a watery grave if they make contact, so a fair amount of jumping around is required. To make matters worse, *Frostbite*'s later levels introduce hungry bears that run after the game's Eskimo protagonist when he tries to enter a completed igloo, and finally, if the temperature reaches zero degrees before he does so you lose a life.

POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

HOW THE CUBE COLOURER DIFFERS FROM Q*BERT

OVERALL OBJECTIVE

While foul-mouthed Q*bert satisfies himself with colouring isometric cubes, Frostbite Bailey's ultimate goal is to build igloos to keep warm inside.

COPIOUS COMBATANTS

Clams, king crabs and snow geese try to knock Bailey off the ice blocks he's colouring, and a big hungry bear tries to eat him when he steps onshore.

TEMPERATURE TROUBLES

It gets cold up north, so much so that if Bailey takes too long to build an igloo the mercury drops to zero degrees and he's literally frozen solid.

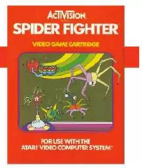
ECLECTIC LEVELS

Unlike *Q*bert*, where there are a series of static cube pyramids, in *Frostbite* you colour ice blocks that move and come in different shapes and sizes.

SHORE LEAVE

You stay on the pyramid in *Q*bert*, occasionally zooming up its sides on a disc, but in *Frostbite* you regularly leave the cubes to get to your igloo.

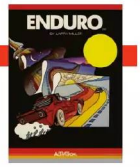
SPIDER FIGHTER



1983

There are some remarkably sophisticated mechanics in *Spider Fighter* considering that it looks like a simple shooter. You have to blast spider-themed foes that try to steal your fruit, but things get more complicated thanks to the ways the enemies interact. Master Nests are the main fruit stealers and they also release Spy Pods, which makes the nests temporarily vulnerable to your poison pellets. Pods instruct the nests to hatch more offspring, so wiping out pods is a priority. Green Widows also emerge from the nests, and they protect them by laying down cover fire and sacrificing themselves to protect their progenitor. Lastly, Stingers evolve from pods and widows when you take out a nest. Stingers are the most dangerous enemy in the game, as they home in on your craft with their missiles in an attempt to destroy it. You can choose pre-game to fire shots straight up or to steer them once they're in the air.

ENDURO

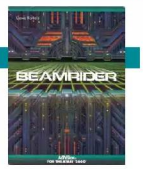


1983

One of the best racing games on the 2600, *Enduro* presents a tough but thrilling challenge. It sets you a per-day goal of beating a prerequisite number of rivals as well as an overall objective of staying in the race for as many days as possible. As might be predicted, your fellow drivers get faster and make themselves more difficult to overtake as the days go by. Since you can be at the wheel for days on end, you of course have to drive at night, which is brought to your attention by a setting sun at the end of each day. As you drive through the dark, you only have your opponents' rear lights to guide your attempts to overtake them. Beyond its day/night cycle, *Enduro* tests you with icy roads where your steering is less responsive. As with the sunsets that tell you night is coming, there are mountains in the backgrounds that turn white shortly before you hit ice by way of a heads-up. Lastly, there's thick fog that stops you from seeing the other drivers' back lights until you're practically in their boots!

BEAMRIDER

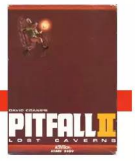
1984



■ The presentation and core mechanic underpinning *Beamrider* differentiate it from all other 2600 fixed-screen shooters. Enemy Saucers scream towards you on a moving 3D grid. You need to dispatch 15 of them on each sector before tackling a Sector Sentinel. These try to escape as Green Blockers rain down fire on you. You have unlimited lasers, but only your torpedoes can destroy a sentinel, and as you only get three per sector you need to save at least one for these bosses. As you progress through the sectors, the saucers start firing back and various secondary foes join the fray. There are also Yellow Rejuvenators. If you catch one you get an extra life, but if accidentally shot they become deadly fireballs. Lastly, *Beamrider*'s aforementioned 3D grid defines its core mechanic, where if you move left or right your craft jumps from one vertical grid line to another. Your enemies also stick to these lines, and so taking shots requires precise timing.

PITFALL II: LOST CAVERNS

1984



■ Thanks to the bespoke hardware in its cartridge, *Pitfall II* looks and sounds more impressive than the original. It's also far bigger, has scrolling multi-layered stages and boasts set-piece challenges like diving for treasure.

DAVID'S MEMORIES

"At Activision we loved the 2600, and we were very good at making games for it. But after ten years newer systems were coming with greater capabilities, and I had the thought that by adding hardware into the cartridge we might extend the life of our favourite game system. I designed a set of circuits that amounted to one of the first ever GPUs in a videogame system in order to more quickly move graphics from ROM to the display hardware. I used it to make *Pitfall II* a larger and more detailed adventure than the original *Pitfall!*. While I was at it I decided to greatly improve the music ability of the Atari hardware. With this hardware I was able to include an arrangement of the fully orchestrated theme song composed for the Saturday morning *Pitfall!* cartoon."

HERO

1984

■ Unusually for a videogame, you work your way downwards toward the end of each level in *HERO*. This falls out of the game's storyline, which has you rescuing miners from the depths of a mine. Where the game impresses most is with its protagonist's mechanics and its levels' layered challenges. *HERO*'s hero has a handy propeller jetpack that allows him to hover upwards, backwards and forwards through the game's maze-like mines and above its deadly hazards and hostile creatures. He has a helmet-mounted laser to take care of the latter, and this can also be used to take out obstructive walls, however it's quicker to use a stick of dynamite. You only get so many of these, and once lit you have to get out of their blast area or risk losing a life. Environmental features such as lava lakes and magma walls are equally dangerous, as is the fact that colliding with lamps can cause them to go out, which leaves you in darkness. Although individually *HERO*'s obstacles and opponents aren't too taxing, the combinations of the dangers found in the game's levels and the way those levels are laid out represents a serious challenge.

ACTIVISION ARCADE

THE STUDIO'S 2600 COIN-OP CONVERSION SWAN SONGS

■ Activision's first 2600 arcade port *Kung-Fu Master* looks and plays a lot like the coin-op original, albeit with less opponents on the screen at any given time. Understandably, the firm's *Double Dragon* conversion is far less visually impressive than its arcade inspiration, but it replicates its street fights more accurately than you might expect. The studio's 2600 adaptation of *Commando* is a showcase of what the system can do in the right hands, and nicely replicates the coin-op with few concessions. Lastly, Activision's 2600 version of *Rampage* looks the part and does a good job of translating the arcade hit's gameplay.

THE MAKING OF DIZZY. PRINCE of the YOLKFOLK.

IT BEGAN AS A 'THROWAWAY' FILLER EARMARKED FOR A COMPILATION BUT IT BECAME ONE OF THE FINEST AND BEST-LOVED GAMES IN THE DIZZY SERIES. PETER RANSON – WHO STILL DRINKS FROM A DECADES-OLD DIZZY MUG – AND JON CARTWRIGHT CRACK OPEN THE GAME'S SECRETS

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS
- **DEVELOPER:** BIG RED SOFTWARE
- **PLATFORM:** ZX SPECTRUM, NES, AMSTRAD CPC, AMIGA CD32 C64, ATARI ST, DOS,
- **RELEASED:** 1991
- **GENRE:** PLATFORM ADVENTURE

Peter Ranson was sitting in Big Red Software's office in Macclesfield, Cheshire, when the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and discovered it was his brother, Paul. Paul, who was Big Red's founder and Codemasters' development director, had a request to create a new *Dizzy* game for a compilation called *Dizzy's Excellent Adventures*. But the catch was that it needed to be developed in a matter of weeks and Big Red was already working on another *Dizzy* title.

It was 1991 and the *Dizzy* series was well established. Big Red had picked up the baton from the Oliver twins to create the fourth adventure, *Magicland Dizzy*, and it was working on the fifth, *Spellbound Dizzy*, a hugely ambitious game spread over a whopping 108 screens that was also earmarked for the aforementioned compilation. If Big Red was to create a sixth game, then there was no way it could be of a comparable size given the short amount of time available. Luckily, Paul and Codemasters understood that.

"The brief was to create a little *Dizzy* game with about six or so screens," says coder Jon Cartwright of what became *Prince Of The Yolkfolk*, and the team felt this was more than doable given its history and experience with *Dizzy* games. "Fred R Williams [who was developing *Spellbound Dizzy*] could knock out a minigame over the weekend so it was thought we could do something similar," Peter explains. But, as Jon adds, the project became more substantial, "We ended up making something quite a bit bigger and with more value, I think."

Development began the following weekend and Codemasters largely left the team to it with everyone involved realising that seeking approval and

"I REMEMBER THINKING THAT I DIDN'T WANT PEOPLE TO FEEL RIPPED OFF"
JON CARTWRIGHT

» Jon Cartwright programmed the game on the lead platforms, Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. He lives in Australia and works as a game consultant.

» Peter Ranson was *Prince Of The Yolkfolk*'s designer and graphics artist and he now owns Spinnaker Studios.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

MAGICLAND DIZZY

PLATFORM: AMIGA, C64, ZX SPECTRUM, ATARI ST, AMSTRAD CPC, PC

RELEASED: 1990

SEYMOUR GOES TO HOLLYWOOD (PICTURED)

PLATFORM: AMIGA, C64, ZX SPECTRUM, ATARI ST, AMSTRAD CPC, PC

RELEASED: 1991

BIG RED RACING

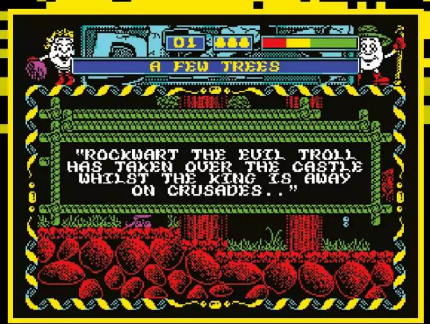
PLATFORM: PC

RELEASED: 1995

having design meetings would have undermined the whole endeavour. As it was, Peter simply grabbed a pencil and drew a map on a piece of wallpaper blu-tacked to the wall. "I was still living with my parents and over the course of those two days, I worked everything out: the maps, the characters and the puzzles," Peter says. "I got in on Monday, faxed it over to Codemasters and got the thumbs-up pretty much immediately so we just got cracking (if I can say that?)." [I'll allow the pun – Ed]

The design 'document' was made up of 30 screens and it placed Dizzy in a fantasy world which was pretty much the only stipulation laid down by The Oliver twins and the games' publisher, Codemasters, when the series' development was handed to Big Red. In this instance the game would tell the story of Daisy being put to sleep for 100 years by Rockwart The Troll in the king's absence and Dizzy would be tasked with saving her. "The core *Dizzy* trope of rescuing Daisy was a given, but putting her in a predicament that provided us with the game's title meant that she also had to be woken by a kiss from a prince," Peter says.

To that end, the narrative drove the game, determining the scope of the puzzles and its overall feel. "I had a core idea of Dizzy becoming a knight of a fantasy land so there needed to be a monarch to perform that function and, as it was a fantasy land, I then had free rein to pull influences



» [ZX Spectrum] Peter points out that the dialogue unfolds the story – in other *Dizzy* games, players were told upfront why the little egg was in a predicament.

UPDATING A CLASSIC

PRINCE OF THE YOLKFOLK WAS ALSO RELEASED ON APPLE'S IPHONE

Talk of bringing *Dizzy* back to life following the series' final game of the 1990s, surfaced in 2003 when the Oliver twins released a 3D video teaser. It showed how a game called *Dizzy: Prince Of The Yolkfolk* would potentially look if it was developed on the PlayStation 2 but, sadly, it didn't progress any further.

In 2011, however, news broke that Paul Ranson was working on an iPhone version of *Prince Of The Yolkfolk*. "He'd found some time over Christmas and decided he'd like to try to make an iOS game," the series' co-creator Philip Oliver tells us. "But he needed a design, art and audio and realised he had it all backed up for *Prince Of The Yolkfolk* on the Amiga." Using those assets, Paul created a demo version which he showed Philip and his brother Andrew.

"We said it was really impressive, gave him our blessing and said he should get it released," Philip says. "But he needed Codemasters permission so he spoke to the company and it just so happened it was at a time when it was wondering if it should get into mobile."

Before long, Paul, head of Slam Productions, was working with DNA Interactive in Leamington Spa to turn the demo into a game that would make use of the iPhone's touch-screen. "The graphics were refreshed by Leigh Christian, the artist who did the game's original Amiga graphics," Philip says and the game was also created for Android.

But although it remained available on the App Store and Google Play until August 2019, there was never a follow-up, despite being well received. "I don't think it did that well," Philip explains.

» [ZX Spectrum] Leaping onto clouds and walking across them was rather difficult. One slip up could lead to frustration or even death.

» [ZX Spectrum] Trolls were already a staple of *Dizzy* lore by this point and the joke was that he was afraid of cute Fluffles.

» [ZX Spectrum] The lion was a combination of the Cowardly Lion and the Aesop Fable about the slave Androcles who had removed a thorn from a lion's paw.

from folklore, fairy tales, myth and fantasy tropes," Peter says. "The map design had to evolve from the puzzles and the puzzles were mostly worked out in reverse order, from the end of the game back to the start."

> "SOMEWHERE IN ALL OUR COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS WE UNDERSTOOD THE LOGIC"
> PETER RANSON

With that in mind, Peter began with the king on a crusade, then figured the monarch would need to be called back so included a herald and a trumpet. Peter ensured the trumpet would have been lost, meaning Dizzy would need to find it. And on and on it went, leading the action all the way back to the opening scene in which Dizzy is trapped in a cave with a box of matches, some leaves, a jug of water and a locked door.

In the course of all of this, Peter created two castles – one good and one bad – and he figured that to get from one to another, players needed to cross a river, ("In my mind the River Styx," Peter says). "The bad side is where Daisy was captured and the Bad Dizzy Doppelganger resided," Peter says. "I had a ferryman to aid the river crossing and, in the castle on the good side, there was the Angel (St Peter). All of this led to the various objects such as the harp, scythe, gold coin and so on. The trick was to distribute these elements around the landscape so players would have to traverse it multiple times and explore everywhere."

As with previous games, players would have to interact with the various characters, collect and use objects, avoid enemies and time jumps to perfection to prevent Dizzy from tumbling towards danger. Players also needed to collect 20 cherries which was necessary for boosting energy and also to complete the game while dealing with a fair few red herrings ("A magic carpet, anyone?" Peter laughs). It was, to some extent, rather complex but to speed up development, Jon, who was just 20 years old at the time and on a summer break from his computer science degree, made use of Fred's ZX Spectrum code for *Magicland Dizzy*.

"He gave me the code and I learned how that game and all the editing tools worked – honestly, it was surprisingly advanced for the time but, because I was working in the office with Fred, I had fantastic support from him which made it so much easier," Jon says. "We had just enough time to keep making it a bit bigger and better and I remember thinking that I didn't want people to feel ripped off." That said, using pre-existing code meant *Prince Of The Yolkfolk* was limited in scope, to some degree. "The game just had to work with the features that existed in *Magicland*," Jon says. "But, to be honest, I rather like artificial constraints like that. They really focus you on making something fun with what you've got and finishing it."

Jon also had an input into the game's design. "I remember being keen to lean into fairytale tropes", he says and he loved the tools he had to hand. "There was a great room editor," he recalls. "But I think there was still some actual coding per puzzle to

CONVERSION CAPERS

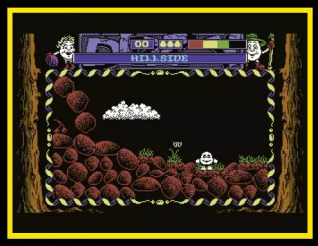
BIG RED SOFTWARE MADE A DIZZYING ARRAY OF DIFFERENT PORTS

ZX SPECTRUM

■ The original *Prince Of The Yolkfolk* looked and felt familiar to *Dizzy* fans primarily because it took direct inspiration from *Magicland Dizzy*. As such, it made good use of colour and it benefitted from numerous well-drawn, detailed characters while bouncing along at a decent pace.

AMSTRAD CPC

■ As always, the Amstrad CPC conversion was pretty much identical to the Spectrum although it was played in a slightly smaller window. The Dizzy character was a little more colourful thanks to the addition of red hands and feet and some nice green shading around the face.



C64

■ The C64 version used Peter's graphics and added a pleasant border but coding duties was handed to Ian Gray who had also worked on the 8-bit C64 port of *Fantasy World Dizzy*. The original music was given a SID spin but it sounded a tad higher-pitched.

ATARI ST

■ As you'd expect, the Atari ST version was a far more colourful affair. Peter Ranson admits to being a little envious of the full-colour assets enjoyed on the 16-bit computers. "On the flipside, the limitations of the 8-bits means I needed to be more creative."

» [ZX Spectrum] The aim of the game, as was standard across the series, was to explore the fantasy world while collecting items and solving puzzles.

check if you had the right items, trigger the dialogue, unlock the doors and so on."

While Jon got on with the code, Peter worked on the graphics using DPaint and Autodesk Animator on the PC. "I had developed a methodical process of producing assets utilising paper sketches and a small hand 'drag' scanner to digitise the sketches and convert them," Peter says. "I would then block them in a large scale using a fat brush in DPaint before scaling them down to the target scale and touching them up to completion.

"It was a crude process by today's standards but it worked. I could generate a couple of poses for each character really quickly that way – going from pencil to screen in minutes. I'd then spend an hour or so finalising the assets and prepping them for insertion into the game." Assets and code were pushed to a ZX Spectrum connected to the PC using ribbon cables.

Peter is particularly proud of the character graphics he created. "I was a figurative artist and animator first and foremost, so I would definitely be more focussed on making them as good-looking as possible. I was really fond of the Ferryman, who was based on Death from the salmon mousse dinner party scene in *Monty Python's The Meaning Of Life*, as a counterpoint to St Peter, an angel. All the characters were cultural tropes of some sort."

Going down this path made the game more focussed, Peter argues. "I think the logic of the puzzles worked because the items had pertinent associations with characters," Peter says. "I think that somewhere in all our collective consciousness we understood the logic because we inherently know and are taught the legends and myths that I was using as those characters and puzzle hooks."

In total, *Prince Of The Yolkfolk* took four weeks to develop and that included the version for the Amstrad CPC. "There were then a couple of weeks of polish, QA and mastering on cassette," Jon says. The code and assets were later shared with the conversion teams, all of whom were hired by Codemasters, who got to work on ports for the Commodore 64, Amiga, Atari ST and DOS. A game based on *Prince Of The Yolkfolk* also emerged on the NES.

When the reviews came through, the tiny Big Red team was overjoyed at how well *Prince Of The Yolkfolk* was received. "I'm not going to put words in anyone's mouth and say it was only intended to be a 'throwaway' game but I don't think there were huge expectations of it in terms of scope of quality. It was there to make the box set up to five games for commercial reasons," Jon says.

After its release on the compilation, it was then given a release of its own. "I think it ended up going to number one which was cool," Jon says. Today, many *Dizzy* fans still say it's one of the series' finest games. "I find it humbling," Peter says. "Who would have thought that what was supposed to be a throwaway title could be considered by many as one of the pivotal titles in the entire series? I'm proud to have been involved with it and to have played my part in the *Dizzy* story." ★

» [ZX Spectrum] Crossing the River Styx, paying the ferryman gold to enter Hades and rescuing Daisy was all a riff on the Orpheus/Euridice Greek myth of love and redemption.

» [ZX Spectrum] Evil Dizzy needed to be eliminated before you could touch that spanner.

» [ZX Spectrum] You could pick up the magic carpet but it was one of a few red herrings dotted around the game.

AMIGA

■ Although Leigh Christian produced both the Atari ST and Amiga graphics, the latter looked especially splendid thanks to a great use of gradient colouring. This version popped from the screen and ran at a great pace. The music could really get a player's feet tapping too.

PC

■ Similar to the Atari ST version in looks, the DOS conversion certainly did the game justice although, as Peter points out, some aspects of the 16-bit ports got lost in translation – notably the Ferryman fashioned after Death ending up being a stout, jolly Friar Tuck-like character.

NES

■ A NES game based on *Prince Of The Yolkfolk* was also released. Named *Dizzy The Adventurer* it made numerous changes in an attempt to appeal to the console market – the health bar was axed, players needed to collect 50 magic stars, Yolkfolk gave useful hints and more.

Sanvein

BUDGET BEAUTY

RETROREVIVAL

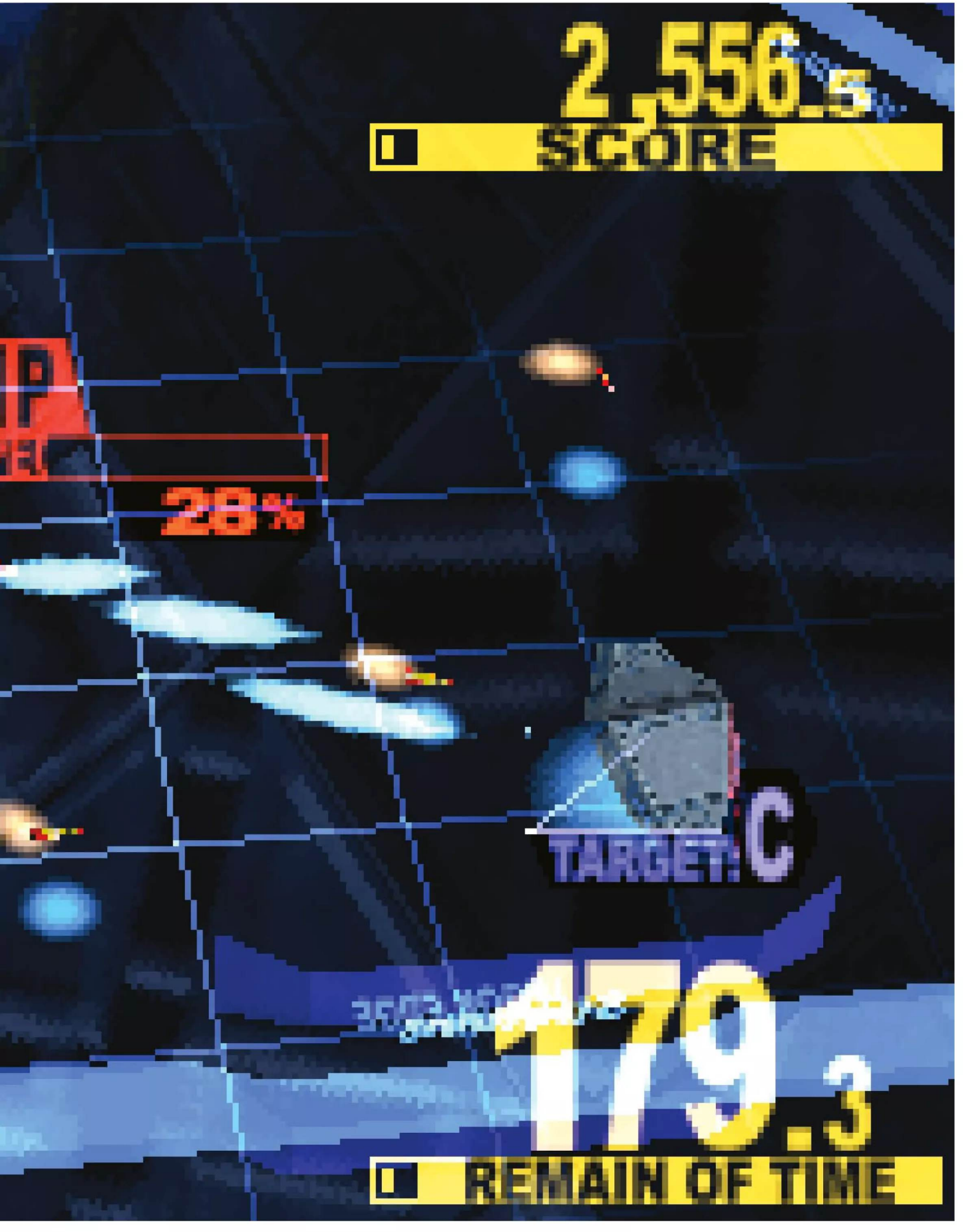
» PLAYSTATION » 2000 » SUCCESS

For a little while around the early Noughties, Saturday visits to see my dad would often conclude with trips to the pub – he'd drink with his friend while my stepmum played designated driver.

These nights were dull. I was too young to drink or relate to the conversations the adults were having, and there was nobody of my age to hang out with. I was expecting a similarly dull night at dad's friend's house when it became the drinking venue because he was looking after his young sons, so when the six year old asked for help with his PlayStation game, I jumped at the opportunity. Surely any game would be better?

When I saw the box art with the Pocket Price label, I immediately felt like I'd walked right into a trap. I'd seen that before, adorning absolute tat like *Lion And The King*, and now I was going to be stuck playing a lemon of a game. Sure enough, *Sanvein* made a poor first impression with its bite-sized shoot-'em-up levels – but then something funny started to happen, as I started to appreciate the strategy of the game. Each short stage is selected from a map, and the more adjacent cells you've completed, the more powerful you'll be in a given stage, but you're restricted by the map layout and time limit. Further play revealed that the soundtrack is quite good too, and although the visuals have little variation they are quite stylish.

Sanvein probably isn't the best starter game for the infant school set, but I actually had quite a good time with it. It was clearly developed with a budget release in mind, and certainly didn't remotely deserve the kicking it got in the press at the time. I felt foolish to have judged the game by its cover, and certainly kept a more open mind regarding straight-to-budget console games after playing it – a strategy that ultimately served me very well. ✱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REMAIN OF TIME

MAGAZINE CRAFT

MATT YEO

When you consider that much of Matt Yeo's time as a videogame journalist was spent writing for Sega mags, it's no surprise that seeing Sonic The Hedgehog in action is what set him on an impressive roller-coaster career – one with more ups and downs, and twists and turns, than Green Hill Zone

Words by Stuart Hunt

THEN

Matt Yeo had his first impactful gaming experience after playing *Star Wars* in the arcades. After becoming obsessed with Sega's *Sonic The Hedgehog* he decided to apply to work in videogames. He got to work on the likes of *Sega Force*, *Mega Machines* and *CVG*.

NOW

After leaving videogame magazines, Matt worked on various magazines for children and then found huge success with a *Moshi Monsters* magazine. He's now the managing director of Cloud King Creative and has worked with both Disney and Lucasfilm.

» [ZX Spectrum] Matt was a big fan of Matthew Smith's classic precision-platformer *Jet Set Willy*. To be fair, who wasn't.

What is the first videogame you remember seeing, Matt?
One of the first was the *Star Wars* arcade game by Atari – the one with the cabinet that you could sit in. It blew my mind with its digitised speech, sound effects from the film, and the fact it felt like you were in the cockpit of an X-wing. For a kid who was such a huge fan of the movies at the time, it really put you in that world.

What home computers did you play growing up?
I didn't get into home gaming properly until the ZX Spectrum arrived. For me, the turning point was when I played *Jet Set Willy*, which was amazing. There was a lot that you could do in the game that you weren't supposed to do – like drop through floors or get stuck in walls. It was also punishingly difficult. You had to be pixel perfect with your jumps. I also played a lot of *Sabre Wulf* – in fact, anything by Ultimate Play The Game. The first *Ghostbusters* game, by Activision, I loved that too.

> "I didn't get into home gaming properly until the ZX Spectrum arrived. For me, the turning point was when I played Jet Set Willy"
> MATT YEO

What would you say has been the most influential game on your career?
I was living in Ipswich and had just finished college in the early Nineties. I was living with a mate and one day he brought home the original Mega Drive with *Sonic The Hedgehog*. I had been out of gaming for many years, and when I saw it, I just couldn't believe how fast and colourful it was. It was like playing a cartoon. I think that was the game that got me back into gaming and set me on the path to a career in videogame journalism.

At what point did you get into journalism?
Well, I always wanted to be a comic-book artist. Comics are a major part of my DNA. I realised though that I wasn't good enough, even though I dabbled with it over the years. I was always good at art and English and got pretty good O levels, but I didn't really do any writing until I'd left college and was living back home. My folks were pressuring me to get a job, and I saw a staff writer job at Europress [formerly Newsfield] advertised in the paper. I was invited to interview and got a job as a staff writer on *Sega Force*. I was 22 at the time.

How was the editorial team structured?
There were about five of us. Chris Knight was the editor, a guy called Adrian Pitt was a staff writer, and he later became the deputy editor. There was also the late Paul Mellerick, who sadly passed away a few years after Impact folded. He was a great guy and went on to write for *GamesMaster* magazine. I joined and started on issue six. I think my first ever review was *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* on the Mega Drive.

How would you describe the style and tone of *Sega Force*?
Back then it was all about the personality of the writers. You weren't faceless. We had cartoons and photos of our heads in each issue, and this allowed the readers to really get to know the team. We'd also put funny text and hidden messages in the flannel panels. The whole magazine was cheeky and irreverent. No one had a degree in journalism. We were

just all enthusiastic fans wanting to produce something people enjoyed.

What sort of things were you tasked with on the magazine?
I started writing cheats and tips, and a handful of reviews. I was piecing whole level maps together using screenshots and by repeatedly pausing the game. I remember mapping out the whole of *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* – every level, putting the screenshots together like a big jigsaw puzzle and laying it out over multiple pages to fit everything on.

Didn't you also write the fiction novels that came as cover gifts?
I did, I wrote two mini novels for the magazine. The first one was for *Super Smash TV*. I'd never written a book before in my life – it was barmy! And then I contributed to another book, which was half *Street Fighter II* and half *Streets Of Rage 2*. I wrote the *Streets Of Rage* story.

Did you collaborate with the game publishers for the content?
Well, we had the games, so we knew them inside out. With *Super Smash TV* we worked closely with Acclaim, who were the publisher of the game at the time. The second book was unofficial, we didn't work with Sega or Capcom on that. Back then you could do that, you could just put stuff out there.

Can you remember anything about your first developer interview?
My first developer interview was with Team17, where I got to speak to them about *Worms*. They're an iconic British developer and I remember having a great chat with those guys. I did develop good relationships with a few UK developers. As a staff writer, I didn't really have much contact with the PR teams though. Chris and Adrian were the main points of contact.

Tell us about your time on *Mega Machines* which Impact also published.
It was aimed at a slightly older, teen audience. It was dense with some issues being nearly 200 pages. It had more of a punkish look and feel to it. We could push the language and images we used a little further. For some reason, someone had this crazy idea to print the spreads sideways in the magazine – so to read it you had to turn it 90 degrees. It was a bold experiment that didn't last very long.

Can you tell us about your transition from staff writer to deputy editor?

My FAVOURITE GAMING MAG

"*CVG* for a couple of reasons. It was funny, and it had a great personality – the guys working on it were a good laugh – Paul Davies, Ed Lomas, Oz Browne (great designer) to name a few. At one point it had this amazing black-and-white comic strip in it called *Bug Hunters*, drawn by a guy called Jerry Paris. Absolutely amazing, and Jerry has gone on to do other stuff in the comics world. Growing up as a fan of comics, I was obsessed with that as a kid."

I REMEMBER WHEN

SUPER NINTEN-DOUGH
"I remember buying a Super Nintendo with my first paycheque as a game journalist. They hadn't been out in the UK for very long. My dad went mad. He couldn't believe I'd wasted my money. I would stay up until the early hours playing *Super Mario World*. I played it to death, to 100% completion."

I REMEMBER WHEN

THE JACKET WITH ATTITUDE

"At Impact we ran a competition to win a whole bunch of *Sonic* merchandise. Sega also gave us these blue and white *Sonic* varsity jackets. We wore those out in Ludlow thinking we looked the bee's knees! How we didn't get out heads kicked in I do not know."

My PROUDEST MOMENT

"I mean I would have to say things like launching *Lego Adventures!* – the first ever licensed Lego magazine. Launching *Toxic* and the fact it is still going strong to this day. Setting up a small independent publishing company and being responsible for one of the biggest selling magazines in the UK. Winning awards and receiving that nice recognition. The biggest thing though is getting to work with so many great people over the years, many of whom have been way, way more talented than me!"

» [Arcade] Matt is a huge *Star Wars* fan, and the Atari 1983 arcade game holds a special place in his heart.

» [Mega Drive] *Sonic The Hedgehog* was the game that got Matt back into gaming and set him on the path to videogame journalism.

I got promoted to production editor on *Sega Force*. I then became the deputy editor of *Sega Master Force* – the Sega Master System spin-off. Nick Roberts was the editor and much of the time he left me to it, as it should be. That was good in-job training. I learnt a whole bunch of stuff I hadn't on *Sega Force*. Sadly, it was short-lived. The magazine, and Impact, didn't last very long from that point.

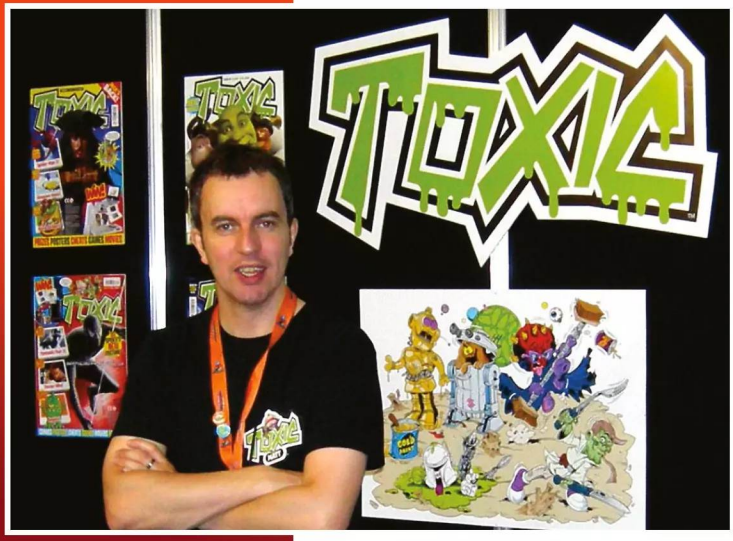
How did you feel when Impact Magazines finally closed?
I was in a state of shock. I'd been in this world writing game reviews and seeing my words in print. I still remember the first time I went into WHSmith, picked up my first issue of *Sega Force*, opened it up and saw my picture with my name and my words. All that had come to an end, or so I thought at the time.

How did the opportunity at Paragon Publishing come about?
Well, I did a whole bunch of crappy jobs and then one day I got a phone call from Nick Roberts, my editor at Impact. He was working at Paragon, as the editor of *Sega Pro*, and asked if I wanted to come on board as a staff writer. Nick would pick me up every Monday morning, from the Midlands, and we would drive down to Bournemouth, work all week, and drive back late Friday evening. We would do that every week. I crashed on his sofa for years!

Who was on the *Sega Pro* team back then?
Nick was the editor, Steve Hardy and Mark Pilkington were staff writers, and Dave 'The Games Animal' Perry was there too. I'd seen him on TV, on *GamesMaster*, and there he was, sat two people away from me, sometimes sporting his bandana. It was very surreal. Paragon was a bigger company than Impact, with more staff, more resources and I just tried to slot in.

How did the magazine get its content?
I remember there was much more of a reliance on getting hold of Japanese and American games magazines. We would scan pictures and try to guess from the text what was going on. At that time, it was the early days of the internet. You were able to get online and read about stuff in other countries, and that's where a lot of the news would come from. I worked on *Sega Pro* until 1996. I then became the temporary deputy editor on a magazine called *PC Kids* for a few months – which was bizarre because I knew nothing about PCs, or kids.

Didn't you also work on *Play* magazine for a short time?
Yes, that was just before I left Paragon. I



» [Mega Drive] *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* was the first game that Matt reviewed. Not classic Indy by any stretch.

My BEST PRESS TRIP

As editor on *Toxic*, Matt got sent on some amazing press trips. He once interviewed Wayne Rooney on the set of a *FIFA* commercial, got flown to New York to chat skateboarding with Tony Hawk, and even visited the Warner Bros backlot in Los Angeles to interview Tim Robbins and Jon Favreau about the movie *Zathura*. His most memorable trip though was retro-gaming related. "When I was on *Toxic*, SquareSoft flew a bunch of journalists out to Japan," recalls Matt. "It was the first and only time I'd ever been. It completely blew my mind because Tokyo really is like no other place. We interviewed SquareSoft about a bunch of games they had coming out. We also got to visit this famous retro-game shop in Akihabara called Super Potato. It had every retro videogame you could imagine. That was amazing and a real highlight."

worked with Damian Butt, who was the editor and later went on to run the company. *Play* was a small team, just three of us if I recall, and we all got on well. I remember going to a game show at Earl's Court and Damian introducing me to a lot of publishers and PRs of PlayStation games. Previously in the past that stuff had been kept from me, so that was a refreshing change and a nice thing for him to do – to put me front and centre like that.

Why did you decide to leave Paragon and move to London?
My girlfriend at the time moved to London and I went with her. There was no plan to get a job working on a games magazine until I had moved there and started applying for work. Thankfully I got a job at EMAP as the deputy editor on *Mean Machines Sega*. Gus Swan was the editor at the time. I think I started on issue 50 and was only there for a few issues before it closed. Again, I was the new boy but even that was strange as people there knew of me and remembered reading my stuff.

When did you join *Sega Saturn Magazine*?
That happened shortly after we moved offices to Canary Wharf. I became the deputy editor and Richard Leadbetter was the editor. Working on an official magazine was very interesting because we had a good relationship with Sega, and this meant we got everything first, as well as cover discs. We had a good team with Lee Nutter and designers Nick Paterson and Jason McEvoy. I ended up working with Jason at Egmont. He became a close mate and I'm still in touch with him now.

What happened after the magazine closed?
A bunch of us got made redundant. Some people moved on to other stuff within EMAP. Someone said to me that Egmont was looking for editorial people to work on kids' stuff. Jason and I applied and got the jobs that we went after. I had two weeks between finishing at *Sega Saturn Magazine* and starting at Egmont, and EMAP asked me to be freelance editor on *CVG*.

You got to work on *CVG* briefly?
Yes, I was working with Ed Lomas and those guys. I knew them anyway, because we worked together at the same company for many years, but I got a little taste of *CVG*, which was one of my favourite magazines. I think Paul Davies was the editor at the time and it was just to help keep the plates spinning while he was away.

How did you find the transition to kids' magazines? Was it difficult?
I had never worked on a kids' magazine before, although there is a degree of crossover with a lot of the videogame magazines I'd worked

> "No one had a degree in journalism. We were just all enthusiastic fans wanting to produce something people enjoyed"
> MATT YEO

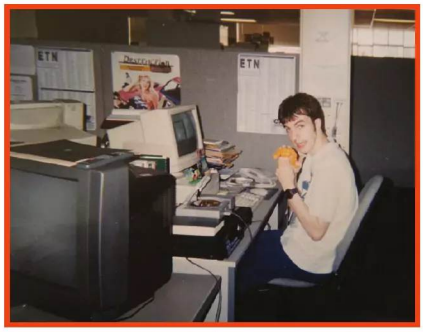
I REMEMBER WHEN

EGM UK? WAIT, WHAT?!
"I once got contacted by Steve Harris, who ran the company that published *EGM* in the US. They were going to publish a UK version and wanted me as editor. I met with him in London, and it was an interesting conversation. For whatever reason though it just never came to pass."

My BEST INTERVIEW

CHARLES MARTINET

Matt didn't get to do many interviews on the videogame magazines he worked on. He did the occasional studio visit, but these were more for game features rather than one-on-one interviews. That would all change when he moved into kids' magazines. "It wasn't until I was the editor of *Toxic* and *Megaton* that I started interviewing celebrities, people in the games industry and going on unbelievable press trips," remembers Matt. "One of the most memorable was an interview I did for *Megaton* with Charles Martinet, the voice of Mario. He even signed my copy of *Super Mario Galaxy*. What a nice guy."



» A photo of Matt taken during his short time working on *Play* magazine at Paragon.

» Matt's first writing job was staff writer on *Sega Force*. He was 22 when he joined the team.

I REMEMBER WHEN

SONIC STRIKES BACK

"I was working on *Sega Force* the day a courier arrived with a mysterious black box containing the circuit board ROMs for *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*. That was a watershed moment. The excitement in the room. It was like finally seeing *The Empire Strikes Back*."

▶ on. I was hired as an editor to help launch a magazine called *Lego Adventures!*. The first ever official Lego magazine. That would have been around 1999 when it launched, which bizarrely coincided with two things: the cinema release of *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, and *Star Wars* being the first licensed sets that Lego had ever created. I'm a massive *Star Wars* fan, and a massive Lego guy, so it was an amazing time.

The magazine you're best known for at Egmont is *Toxic*. Tell us about that.

I had worked on various other licensed kids' magazines at Egmont, and then they wanted me to work on this magazine they had in development for a while – a boys' lifestyle magazine. It had a bunch of different names, but the one that stuck with me was *Toxic* – the name that the editor who was developing it at the time, Sam Hickman, had come up with. Sam was the editor of *Sega Saturn Magazine* before Richard took it on. She had also worked on some other videogame magazines before that. It was weird because I was always one step behind her [laughs].

> "I then became temporary deputy editor on a magazine called PC Kids for a few months – which was bizarre because I knew nothing about PCs, or kids"
> MATT YEO

Why do you think *Toxic* was so successful and has endured for so long?

I think it was our mix of being a bit anarchic. It was sort of slime and toilet humour, but it never went too far. It also had its own cast of cartoon characters that we created called Team Toxic. It had a good mix of original comic strips that I commissioned, lifestyle stuff and free gifts. The magazine had a personality, and it worked well. I have a lot of fond memories of it. I was there for ten years. It opened many doors for me.

You then went out on your own. How did that come about?

Egmont had got the licence to do a magazine based on the *Ben 10* property, which was a big Cartoon Network animated show. I was asked to find a freelance editor and designer to work on it remotely. I found some good people, but they backed out at the 11th hour. I was asking myself who do I know that knows *Ben 10*, and this lifestyle stuff, and then I had this lightbulb moment. I thought I could do this. So, I said to my designer on *Toxic* at the time, let's leave and start our own company.

What happened next?

We set up SkyJack Publishing and had the contract to do *Ben 10* magazine for two years. It was like nothing had changed; we were just working from home. It was eventually brought back in-house, but by that time we had started planning. We had approached a lot of potential gaming clients for our next step: launching *Megaton* – the first ever dedicated videogame magazine for kids.

What was the idea behind *Megaton* then?

It was going to sit on the rack in newsagents with kids' mags, not the gaming magazines. When we did have cover gifts, it was all paper-based stuff – sticker sheets,

My FUTURE CLASSIC

ASTRO BOT

"My gaming now comes through those my kids play now, and they are avid gamers. I haven't had the chance to play it yet but from what I've seen and read about it, *Astro Bot* seems to be something quite special."

» Matt with Nick Roberts.

» Matt dominating the mic while on stage at a press event in Camden, London.

» The *Sonic* varsity jacket Matt once owned. He's burned all photos of him wearing it. Probably for the best.

3D models, posters, things like that. We put it out there, had a massive print run, using all our own money and some investment, and it bombed! We sold something like 10,000 copies. We were like, we owe lots of money, what are we going to do?

> "We put it out there, had a massive print run, using all our own money and some investment, and it bombed!" MATT YEO

Sounds like a scary time. What did you do?
We took on every creative job we could find to keep our heads above water, and didn't really pay ourselves anything for a year or so. Then what happened was I read an article in *Edge* about a new UK developer called Mind Candy. They had just set up in Battersea and were launching an online game called *Moshi Monsters*. We met with them, and they said wouldn't it be great if one day there was an official *Moshi Monsters* magazine. We continued talking and then later did a pitch where we said let's team up – we'll do the magazine; you invest in it. And they did.

What happened when the *Moshi Monsters* magazine launched?
At the time, I had moved from London to Harrogate where I am now. I'm working from home, I've got no money, and our first child is on the way. The first issue launches, and the sales data starts coming in – massive! I think at its highest point, we were selling around 250,000 copies a month. We were in the top ten of all magazines published in the UK. We were outselling the likes of *GQ*, *Empire*, *FHM*. It was the biggest success of my career. With money coming in, we had a physical office just outside of London and hired staff.

What happened next?
I didn't know for how long we could ride this *Moshi* wave, so I started to spec out ideas for other magazines. I kept pushing for new magazines rather than more spin-offs from *Moshi*. The relationship with the other directors then started to get quite strained. In the end, I sold my stake and set up my own independent company called Cloud King Creative.

Tell us about Cloud King Creative and what you're doing now?
Cloud King is primarily a kids' book packager. We work for a lot of big book publishing companies. No project's the same, everything is different. Licensed stuff, non-licensed stuff. I'm also doing a lot more writing now, going back to where I started as a staff writer. Cloud King has been going for almost 12 years now, so I must be doing something right!

How did you come up with the name and what have been your highlight projects?
I thought Cloud because I thought imagination, King because we're the best at what we do, and Creative because it could be anything – not just magazines. We've worked on a lot of official Marvel and *Spider-Man* books. A few years ago, I got to write the official *Star Wars* annual for Farshore, an imprint of HarperCollins. I got to work with Lucasfilm, which was a dream come true. ✱

Game & Watch: Donkey Kong II fact

■ Although this bears the name *Donkey Kong II*, the arcade game *Donkey Kong Jr* is the game that officially sits between *Donkey Kong* and *Donkey Kong 3* in the series chronology.

PROCESSOR: SHARP SM510 4-BIT CPU

GRAPHICS: PRE-PRINTED SEGMENTED LCD DISPLAY

AUDIO: SINGLE-CHANNEL PIEZOELECTRIC BEEPER

RAM: 512 BYTES

Game & Watch: Donkey Kong II

» **MANUFACTURER:** Nintendo » **YEAR:** 1983 » **COST:** £23.95 (launch), £90+ (today, boxed), £55+ (today, unboxed)

Nintendo's Game & Watch range, a series of dedicated LCD handheld games, did very good business for the company from its introduction in 1980. After a couple of years of successful releases, Nintendo decided to introduce a brand-new dual-screen format in 1982, first used in the game *Oil Panic*. The Game & Watch adaptation of the arcade hit *Donkey Kong* adopted this format the same year and was wildly successful, and also introduced the cross-shaped d-pad that would become ubiquitous on Nintendo hardware. Nintendo returned for a second bite of the cherry with *Donkey Kong II* the next year.

The multi-screen Game & Watch units are fascinating in terms of their design, since it's so easy to draw a line from them to the Nintendo DS. A clamshell case houses two vertically stacked screens and the controls, which reside on the bottom half of the unit. The d-pad and button may reside lower on the unit and the clasp that keeps the unit closed wasn't carried forward, but the influence on the design of the later hit machine is plain to see. ✱

ESSENTIAL GAME

Donkey Kong II

Being a dedicated handheld, there's only one game you can play on this, but it's a good one that combines aspects of both of the first two *Donkey Kong* arcade games. Donkey Kong has been caught and chained up by Mario, and it's down to his son to free him. The lower screen is a platform section similar to *Donkey Kong*, where Junior retrieves a key and leaps over sparks on power lines, before proceeding to the *Donkey Kong Jr*-style top screen where he climbs chains to unlock his dad.

THE MAKING OF

Panza KICK BOXING

NOWADAYS, FIGHTING GAMES ARE USUALLY MADE FOR SPECTACLE, WITH FIREBALLS, BIG JUGGLING COMBOS AND MORE ON-SCREEN EFFECTS THAN A MARVEL BLOCKBUSTER. BUT IN THE EARLY NINETIES, THERE WAS A PERIOD OF TIME WHEN GAMES WERE MADE THAT PUT REALISTIC MARTIAL ARTS BEFORE SHOWMANSHIP. GAMES LIKE PANZA KICK BOXING

WORDS BY PAUL KAUTZ

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** LORICIEL
- **DEVELOPER:** FUTURA
- **PLATFORM:** ATARI ST, AMIGA, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1990
- **GENRE:** FIGHTING GAME

Young Pascal Jarry did not fit the typical nerd stereotype of the Eighties, as he was not only a very talented programmer, but also an enthusiastic martial artist. "I started doing karate when I was 11 and have been doing full contact, kickboxing, French kickboxing and a bit of Thai boxing ever since," he tells us. This passion, combined with the programming skills he put to good use at the French gaming studio Loriciel, led him to create a realistic martial arts game.

Two things were particularly important to him, "Firstly, I wanted to value training: you train, you progress. Secondly, I wanted an inspiring champion. I first contacted Dominique Valera, my full-contact coach at the time. I had a poster of him in my bedroom as a boy. But he wanted 200,000 francs up front, which Loriciel could not afford." In case you don't know the conversion rate from francs to pounds by heart, adjusted for inflation, this is the equivalent of just under £70,000 today – a lot of money!

So Pascal contacted another French martial arts star of the time: André Panza (see The Flexible Panza panel). Not only was he immediately aboard, he was also much more affordable than Dominique Valera. And he was also the one who convinced Pascal that the game should be about kickboxing, not karate.

The game was then developed over a period of almost two years by Loriciel's Futura label. The finished *Panza Kick Boxing* was released in late-1990, first on the Atari ST and Amiga (both versions are virtually identical), before making its way to various other platforms (see the Conversion Capers panel).

After booting up the game, you create your own personal fighter. Well, actually you choose one of eight heads, which, according to Pascal, belonged to various Loriciel employees. These are then placed on a static body, taken from a press photo of André Panza. The head choice is purely superficial, however, as in the game itself all the characters look exactly the same. Each

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

MGT: MAGNETIK TANK (PICTURED)

PLATFORM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS

RELEASED: 1986

SHERMAN M4

PLATFORM: AMIGA, ATARI ST, AMSTRAD CPC

RELEASED: 1989

GOLDEN EAGLE

PLATFORM: AMIGA, AMSTRAD CPC

RELEASED: 1991

» [Atari ST] The entire game takes place in just two arenas (and a training hall).

» [Amiga] The eight different opponents fight with significantly different attacks.

fighter has three relevant combat statistics: Strenght (as it is misspelt in the English version), Resistance and Reflexes. These stats can and must be improved between fights through training. If you enter a fight against a tougher opponent completely unprepared, you will generally not even make it through the first round.

"I WANTED AN INSPIRING CHAMPION"
PASCAL JARRY

As already mentioned, *Panza Kickboxing* is not a light-hearted button masher, but rather a serious martial arts simulation, just like *Budokan: The Martial Spirit* (see RG 255). This becomes clear from the move editor, which allows you to choose from a whopping 55 punches and kicks in the Select Hits menu. Not all of them are available at the same time, however, as the game only uses one attack button on the joystick. This means that just 13 of the 55 attacks are available to choose from – five using the normal joystick directions and a further eight while also pushing down the fire button. There are high, medium and low punches and kicks available, swipes, jump attacks, and more – the choice is overwhelming at the start. Although the selection process is not particularly intuitive, it does provide you with a remarkably powerful tool that is as unique now as it was in 1990.

According to Pascal, the types and number of attacks were created in close collaboration with André Panza, who is listed as 'Sport Expert' in the manual, and was definitely more than just the face on the box. "André came to Paris for our filming session and we went through all the moves I had prepared for the game. I was on the receiving end of his attacks, with a few pads of course, and [graphic designer] Marc de Florès was operating the camcorder. We filmed for hours! I was exhausted from taking so many punches and kicks all day. During filming, André gave me valuable tips on movement. He wanted the game to look like him and that was also very important to me. For example, we added the victory splits that he liked to do in the ring. After that, the real work began: Marc connected the camcorder to a TV screen and a simple capture card and went through all the footage, frame by frame. ▶

» Pascal Jarry was the lead developer of *Panza Kick Boxing*. After Loriciel, he worked at Sony and other companies before founding a consultancy firm for agile project management, which he has been running for over 20 years.

» [Amiga] Between the fights, a ring girl with a very expressive face provides a bit of entertainment.

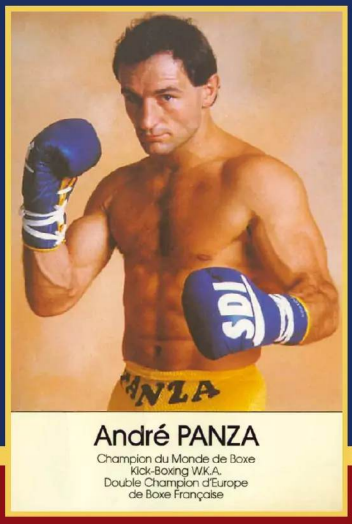
THE FLEXIBLE PANZA

SAY HELLO TO DR KO

When you think of some of the most famous fighters of all time, many names quickly come to mind – Bruce Lee, Muhammad Ali, Jackie Chan, Sugar Ray Robinson, Benny Urquidez, etc. André Panza, however, will probably not be one of them. This is despite the fact that during his professional career he fought 114 bouts, winning 109 of them, 87 were by knockout or technical knockout, earning him a total of nine world championship belts: six in kickboxing, two in savate and one in full contact, as well as the nickname Doctor KO.

At the height of his success (mostly in the Eighties, but also in the early Nineties), he even made a brief foray into the music charts. In collaboration with French singer Jean-Luc Marquette, also known as Jean-Luc France, he recorded a song called *Force Ta Ligne De Chance* (roughly translated: Force Your Luck!) – not exactly something to write home about, but it did scratch the top 50 of the French singles charts in 1990.

After his fighting career ended, André did not hang up his boxing gloves. Instead, he opened up the Panza Gym in his home town of Strasbourg, which he runs to this day, and where he trains the world champions of tomorrow – including his daughter Angelina Panza, who is also a successful lightweight kickboxer.

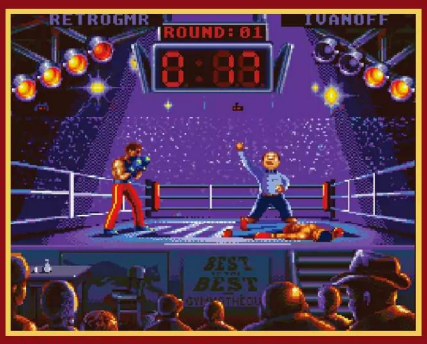


When he found the image he wanted, the slow process of digitisation began. It was so tedious! Then he had to clean up each frame, adding a little hand-painted motion blur here and there to give the impression of fast movement. He spent months doing this incredible work."

The result of this effort is combat that feels remarkably realistic; attacks have noticeable power and weight, you can grab, block, dodge, turn away – everything is possible. When you land a mighty blow, not only will you hear a sound, but you will also see a yellow flash at the point of impact, which can sometimes be enough to instantly knock out an opponent's lights.

This isn't just a figure of speech, as the energy system in *Panza Kick Boxing* is amazingly clever: there is no typical life bar like there is in many other games. Instead,

» [PC-Engine] The game's combat system does not rely on quick combos, but on well-considered, strategically placed attacks.



» [SNES] A KO literally means lights out, thanks to the game's innovative energy system.

there are four spotlights on each fighter's ring side that get dimmer and dimmer with each hit – and when it's lights out, then, well, it's actually lights out. It's quite a beautiful metaphor, and it also keeps the game screen pleasantly clean: there are no artificial life bars dangling around, just the fighters in a realistic-looking arena, yet you have all the information you need right in front of you.

The energy you got beaten out of you is slowly restored over time, and a knockdown does not immediately mean the end of the fight. Particularly at its beginning, when your strength is still there, a downed person will recover quickly. But you can clearly see how this recovery becomes more and more difficult with each subsequent knockdown. By the time you've hit the mat four times, you're completely out. It is a shame, however, that, unlike *Budokan* with its smart Ki system, there is no fatigue

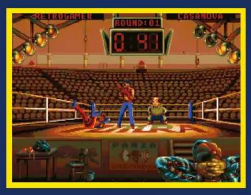
» [Amiga] You can mix together your very own fighting style by choosing from 55 pre-made attacks.

here. In *Panza Kick Boxing*, you can dish out attack after attack after attack without ever getting tired, which doesn't really fit in with the game's realistic approach.

The only gameplay mode besides the Vs mode is the Career mode, which pits your own fighter against eight increasingly strong opponents with names such as Dom Weak, Casanova, TD Panther and Bulldo Man. And, naturally, a certain André Panza awaits you at the very end, sporting, of course, the maximum rating of 99 in all stats. You can take on six of the eight fighters for a good brawl at any time, but in order to be able to challenge André you have to beat up all of the other guys first.

The tougher ones out of those eight are not only more resilient, but also use more varied and effective attacks. This means that the first few fights, which are still fairly easy, are usually over after one or two rounds, while the later ones can go on for the maximum of twelve rounds, each lasting one minute.

CONVERSION CAPERS



ATARI ST

■ Pascal Jarry developed the game originally on the Atari ST, alongside Marc de Florès (graphics) and Michel Winogradoff (sound). Here everything is as it should be: the graphics are crisp, detailed and colourful, the animations are fast, the controls are precise. To this day, this is Pascal's favourite version.

AMIGA

■ The Amiga version of *Panza Kick Boxing*, programmed by Pascal's Loriciel colleague Nicolas Massonnat, was developed alongside its Atari ST brother, released at the same time, and is virtually identical to it. The Amiga game sold better than the ST version, though, so this is the one most people are familiar with.

PC ENGINE

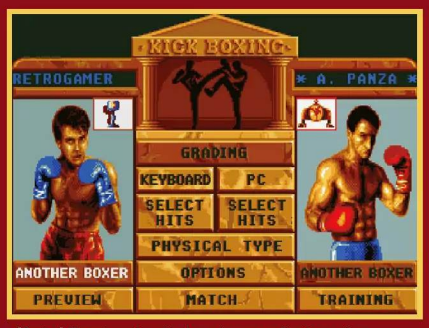
■ The most obvious change of the PC Engine version is the new cover artwork, which features exaggeratedly muscular fighters doing some laid-back kickboxing. The game is largely the same, but instead of being able to mix and match your own attacks, you choose from eight pre-made movesets. In any case, it's an excellent conversion.

PC

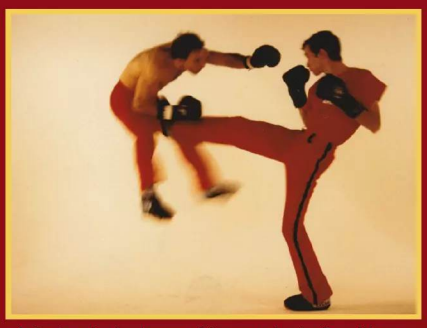
■ A direct conversion of the Amiga version, which manages to be less colourful than the original despite using the superior palette of VGA cards. In addition, all combat sounds and voice samples are being played back exclusively through the scratchy PC speaker. Technical peeves aside, it's a really good conversion.

NES

■ The NES version of the game, which was released at the same time as the Game Boy version, is largely identical to it, with the important difference that once again two players can kickbox each other. It also has remarkably fluid animations, even if the fighters are a barely recognisable muddle.



» [Amiga] Choosing a head is the only personalisation option. However, this choice has no effect on the fighter's appearance in the game.



» A shot from the development of the game, showing Pascal Jarry kicking André Panza. It took months of painstaking work to create the elaborate animations from single frames like these.

» [PC] Just like in real life, improving yourself requires a lot of training.

All the action takes place on one screen, with no scrolling whatsoever. The entire game consists of just three different venues: the training hall and two fighting rings, one of them almost completely empty, the other one bursting with life. More important than that, however, are the simply stunning animations of the fighters. It's not just the attacks that look fantastic, it's also the reactions to them: a powerful backhand to the face causes the receiving head to snap back violently. A jumping kick to the stomach causes the receiver to bounce back dramatically. A spinning kick to the knee causes a painful limp. And a downed opponent will sway precariously as he woozily gets back up. There was even room left on the two floppy disks for a few just-for-fun animations: if a downed opponent takes too long to get up, for example, the other fighter gets bored and makes a questioning gesture in the player's direction.

It's no wonder then that *Panza Kick Boxing* got mostly really good reviews. Scores of 87% in *Amiga Action* from February 1991, 84% in *Zero* and 82% in *CU Amiga* all deliver a clear message. The result of that message was that the game sold very well. There are no precise figures, but Pascal estimates that more than a million copies have been sold worldwide. This also has to do with the fact that it was ported to just about every game platform available at the time, and in several versions, but not always under the name *Panza Kick Boxing*. "Nobody knew André Panza in the US. I remember that our American publisher had the rights to the *Best Of The Best* film with Eric Roberts and James Earl Jones. They also wanted to have karate in the title, so they changed it. I thought it was stupid, but there was nothing I could do about it. Dealing with those guys was a pain in the ass," says Pascal.

The result was *Best Of The Best: Championship Karate*, which was little more than a slightly expanded version of the original game, with Panza missing from the title, although he is still included as the final opponent in many versions. There are also a few new fighter heads to choose from, some opponents have new names such as Tsong Po, Chan Lee and Ivanoff, and in some versions one of the arenas is replaced by a kumite ring.

If you want to try *Panza Kick Boxing* again today, you need to be prepared to invest quite a bit of time. This isn't your quick pick-up-and-play brawler, but a serious martial-arts simulation that takes some getting used to. But once you do, it produces some incredibly satisfying results, and teaches you about a true martial-arts legend that you may not have heard of before. ✱

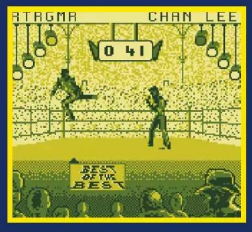
THE MANY DIFFERENT FACES OF *PANZA KICK BOXING*

AMSTRAD CPC

André Panza is a weak husk on the Amstrad CPC. Instead of lamps, there are classic health bars that drain very quickly, making the fights much shorter. The fighters' movements, while nice to look at, are sluggish, the sound is awful and there is only one predefined set of moves. The conversion for the GX4000, which followed a year later, is slightly better.

SNES

Apart from not being able to use the Sega Activator, the SNES conversion is pretty much identical to the Mega Drive version, including the improved sound and added animations around the ring. While a few buttons on the SNES gamepad are used for punches – the majority of attacks are still done through directional inputs on the d-pad.



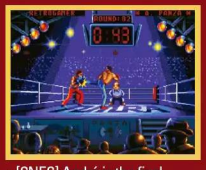
GAME BOY

The Game Boy's version of *Best Of The Best: Championship Karate* is very barebones. There's a limited moveset, the referee is gone, as is the two-player mode, and the two fighters in the ring look identical, making it hard to tell them apart. But the fluid animations! Crazy! So, in terms of content, it's pretty weak, but its technical prowess is amazing!

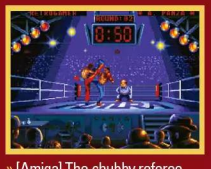
MEGA DRIVE

This version was only released under the names *Best Of The Best: Championship Karate* in the West, and as *The Kick Boxing* in Japan and South Korea. The similarities were such that the conversion didn't even use the extra gamepad buttons for more accessible fights. Instead, it was one of the very few games to use Sega's ill-fated Activator motion-control system.

"I WAS ON THE RECEIVING END OF ANDRÉ'S ATTACKS"
PASCAL JARRY



» [SNES] André is the final opponent you face, and as you'd expect, he's no pushover.



» [Amiga] The chubby referee is constantly moving around in the background.

Monster
HIT
DMG
CRT
Fetid Glow
28

Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones

PARALYSED BY PLASTIC

» GAME BOY ADVANCE » 2004 » INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

About a decade ago I bought a sealed copy of *Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones* for £70. Ten years on it remains sealed and unplayed and I keep wondering if I should sell it.

It's not that I haven't played Intelligent Systems' fantastic sequel before, in fact I actually still own a digital copy of the game as part of Nintendo's 3DS Ambassador Program, which I absolutely rinsed. I love the *Fire Emblem* series though and have physical copies of all the European releases, and this is part of that collection.

In one sense I lose absolutely nothing from selling my sealed copy, mainly because I still have the digital version of the game knocking around, meaning I can play it any time I choose to do so. In fact, I'd gain quite a lot from selling it, because the last sealed copy went for over £500, which is a ridiculous amount of money, but that's the world we currently live in.

Maybe there's a small part of me that wonders just how high the price of the game is likely to climb, which would result in an even nicer weekend break somewhere for myself and my wife Melanie, and perhaps even a new Hot Toys figurine for my shed.

I don't really think it's greed that's stopping me from selling my copy of *The Sacred Stones*, but rather that it's one of only four retro games I own that I never got around to opening – the others being *Steel Battalion: Line Of Contact*, *Demolition Girl* and the DS reissue of *Chrono Trigger*.

I like having these games in absolutely pristine condition and often imagine unwrapping them and drinking in that fresh box smell. I tell myself that I will get around to playing them one day and I probably will, but when you consider I've owned *Chrono Trigger* since 2008, there's every chance they'll all stay sealed forever. And that's a shame really. Games are ultimately meant to be played and if I can't muster up the enthusiasm to play these games, then perhaps someone else should get to enjoy them instead. ✱

THE HISTORY OF DUNGEON

FOUL FIENDS AND CAVERNOUS CATACOMBS ARE YOURS TO CONTROL IN THE DELICIOUSLY DARK UNDERWORLD OF DUNGEON KEEPER. WE LIGHT A TORCH AND DESCEND DOWN A DARK STAIRCASE TO EXPLORE BULLFROG'S SHADOWY STRATEGY SERIES, FROM THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT TO MODERN INCARNATIONS

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY

You could say we have James Bond to thank for *Dungeon Keeper*. After making games such as *Populous* and *Theme Park*, which tasked players with bringing joy and prosperity to their populations, Peter Molyneux had a more sinister idea as he watched secret agent 007 in action. "The idea of playing the dark side was sparked by watching movies, particularly *James Bond* films," he tells us. "I was always fascinated by how the hero would infiltrate and destroy the villain's lair without a second thought about the incredible effort it must have taken to build. One scene that stuck with me was from *You Only Live Twice*, where an entire hollowed-out volcano – an engineering marvel, really – was obliterated. That got me thinking, 'What if players could step into the shoes of the villain and experience the pride (and chaos) of building and defending such a masterpiece?'"

Tabletop role-playing adventures were another early inspiration for the team at Bullfrog Productions. "Peter regularly had board gaming nights at his house in Surrey, which was an eclectic mixture of old, vintage

» [PC] Onwards! Our minions march towards an enemy stronghold.

» [PC] Now who's going to clean up this mess?

KEEPER

» [PC] As you conquer areas they turn dark and charred on the world map.

» The *Dungeon Keeper 2* team emerge from their lair for a group photo.

and modern," recalls programming lead Simon Carter. "We'd be playing *Dungeons & Dragons* next to a suit of armour, a full-size Dalek and a swimming pool hidden behind a secret door. It was after an evening of *D&D* and a board game called *Wiz-War* that Peter started talking about an idea for a game based on dungeons."

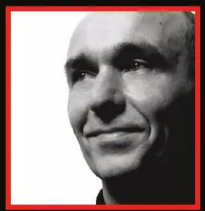
> "THE IDEA OF PLAYING THE DARK SIDE WAS SPARKED BY WATCHING MOVIES"
> **PETER MOLYNEUX**

Both Simon and Peter credit Mark Healey, who later cofounded *LittleBigPlanet* studio Media Molecule, with helping to bridge the gap between early ideas and a more fully realised game world. "At this point the entirety of *Keeper* was the idea: *D&D*, but you're running the dungeon," stresses Simon. "There was no design, art, setting, no mechanics or gameplay ideas. It wasn't until Mark Healey moved onto the project that we had anything visual to hook on to." Peter is similarly quick to offer praise for Mark. "While we had a general idea of mixing dark, sinister elements with humour, it wasn't fully formed at the start," he agrees. "Mark Healey's brilliant, whimsical art style played a huge role in shaping that balance. His work brought a light-hearted, almost mischievous charm to the otherwise grim setting, and the team naturally built on that dynamic as we progressed."

What started to emerge from the team at Bullfrog was a novel blend of strategy and dungeon management. Playing as the dungeon keeper, your mission is to lead your minions through 20 diverse levels of cleverly designed scenarios, keeping them fed, housed, trained and satisfied whilst you build rooms and traps. To make this a smooth experience, beneath the hood lurked smart AI and a complex game engine built partly on the foundations of the 3D flying adventure *Magic Carpet*. "The *Magic Carpet* engine was extremely capable but it was also designed for a very different style of game," Simon points out. "The first few demos of *Keeper* were entirely first-person," he continues. "One of my first jobs was to add real-time shadows, and shift the perspective to the top-down isometric view that a strategy and management game would need."

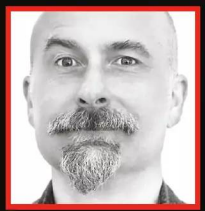
First-person viewpoints would nonetheless end up being one part of the game. Using a Possession spell, players can see through the eyes of any character in their dungeon. It's an example of how *Dungeon Keeper* rolled ideas from different genres into one experience. "We tried out so many ideas during the game's development that, by the end, we were all going a little bit mad," reflects Simon. "Finishing *Dungeon Keeper* was a process of whittling this giant rotating kebab of gameplay mystery meat we'd been keeping warm for four ▶

INTERVIEWEES



PETER MOLYNEUX
■ Peter cofounded Bullfrog Productions and oversaw the creation of *Dungeon Keeper*. He is now the creative director at 22cans.

SEAN COOPER
■ Sean was the lead game designer for *Dungeon Keeper 2*. He is now technical director at 3D character creation specialists Didimo.



SIMON CARTER
■ Simon was the programming lead for the original *Dungeon Keeper*. These days he's a technical strategy lead at Google DeepMind.

JOHN MILES
■ John was the art director for *Dungeon Keeper 2*. Now a design strategist, he cofounded a global health app business.

» An early concept art sketch for *Dungeon Keeper*.

» [PC] Bile Demons are one of the most iconic characters from the game.

years, hacking off the bits that had gone a bit mouldy." Simon is quick to add that this was a much-loved kebab, though. "Importantly, all of this was done with love, excitement and enthusiasm, and a questionable disregard of culinary norms, basic hygiene and genre expectations," he summarises.

> "I WANTED TO BRING IN MORE REAL-TIME STRATEGY ELEMENTS" SEAN COOPER

***Dungeon Keeper* was released in July 1997 to overwhelmingly positive reviews.** There was enough demand for second helpings that in November of the same year, Bullfrog released *The Deeper Dungeons* expansion pack. The original game and the expansion were combined the following year and packaged as *Dungeon Keeper Gold*.

While all of this was happening, great change was afoot behind the scenes. Immediately after *Dungeon Keeper* was released, Peter left Bullfrog, the studio he had cofounded in 1987 before it was acquired by Electronic Arts in 1995. He departed to form Lionhead Studios, where he would go on to create games like *Black & White* and *Fable*. Looking back, Peter argues that the creativity of the first *Dungeon Keeper* game evolved from a less corporate, smaller-team approach. "I firmly believe that small, focussed teams can achieve remarkable things when given the freedom and time to evolve a concept," he reasons. "That was true in the Nineties, and it remains true today. Games like *Dungeon Keeper* or *Minecraft* come from that space of raw creativity and iterative experimentation. Large, well-structured teams are excellent for refining and scaling ambitious projects, but they often lack the spontaneity and agility that small teams bring. There's a certain magic in the chaos of a small team that can't easily be replicated in a more corporate, regimented environment."

While Peter may not have been part of making *Dungeon Keeper 2*, numerous other long-term Bullfrog staff were. This helped to ensure that the essence of what made the first game great was kept intact, albeit by a larger team working in a more systematic way, but still evolved. Lead game designer duties were handed to Sean Cooper, the creator of cyberpunk strategy classic *Syndicate*, whom Simon Carter cites as an inspiring figure during the development of the first *Dungeon Keeper*. "Most of what I pulled into *Keeper* were ideas that I'd learned from Sean Cooper," affirms Simon. Sean had, in fact, been briefly involved at the very start of *Dungeon*

» [PC] You can possess your creatures to control them using a first-person view.

» [PC] Torture chambers are the perfect place to convert captured heroes to your cause.

» [PC] Warlocks enjoy nothing more than spending time in libraries researching new spells.

» [PC] Casinos add some glitz and sparkle to your otherwise gloomy underworld.

» [PC] The team worked with Paris-based animators to create impressive cutscenes for *Dungeon Keeper 2*

Keeper before leaving Bullfrog for Virgin Interactive. His recollection of the more mature development setup as he returned for *Dungeon Keeper 2* is a positive one. "It was a shift from writing games without many plans to getting really organised about what we were going to build," Sean reflects. "It was about keeping everyone in full view of what we were all trying to do together. That's common practice today, but it was one of the first times for us."

Given the success of the first game, Sean was keen to balance evolution with preservation. "I wanted to keep the whole flipped premise of designing a dungeon and having the heroes trying to defeat you. For me, that was the biggest charm about *Dungeon Keeper*. But what I wanted to do was bring in more real-time strategy elements. Hence the turrets and more turret-focussed gameplay," he explains. In guiding players towards strategically placing different turrets, firing everything from cannon balls to lightning bolts, Sean points out that *Dungeon Keeper 2* was a forerunner to modern tower defence games. It also leaned into aspects of popular real-time strategy games of the time. "We'd been playing a lot of *Command & Conquer* and *Total Annihilation*, and I wanted to get some of those elements into it," Sean recalls. "*Dungeon Keeper* was essentially a building game. I wanted *Dungeon Keeper 2* to be that plus real-time strategy. Building, but with a lot more attack and defence."

» [PC] Electric chairs are a centrepiece of the sequel's torture chamber.

Despite having a strategic role, Sean also spent time getting into the detail. "There was one day when I thought, 'I don't think we're getting it.' So I designed a level in the level editor," he says. "And that level – we cross-examined it, we questioned it – really unlocked things. It got filtered out across all the other levels."

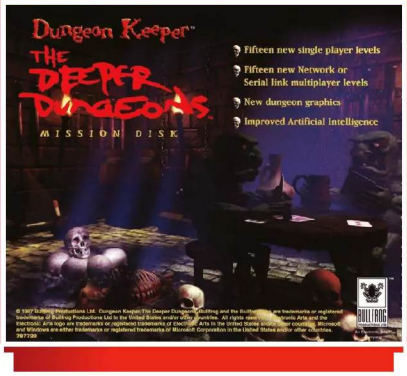
Similar innovation was happening in the art department. "We decided we wanted to make a completely 3D game with 3D lighting, characters and animation," recalls art director John Miles. "I remember talking to [lead programmer] Alex Peters and he seemed quite excited about the idea. It was a technical leap," he adds. The pre-rendered sprites of the original were replaced with full 3D models. Close attention was also paid to cutscenes. "For *Dungeon Keeper 2* we took a bit more of a filmic approach," John explains. "We started working with Animare, a Paris-based animation company. We got them to do a lot of sketch work

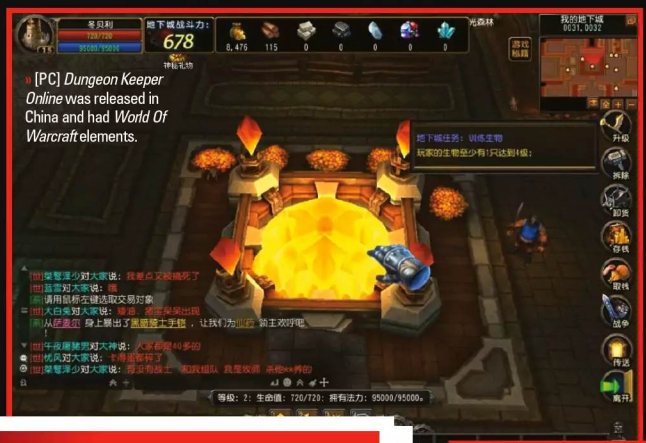
EXPANDING THE DUNGEON

WHAT LURKS WITHIN THE EXPANSION DISC?

Released just one year after the base game, *The Deeper Dungeons* add-on disc provided 15 new levels and 15 new multiplayer maps. The solo campaign is not for the faint-hearted, as it introduces a prominent difficulty spike that assumes mastery of the original campaign. In part, the extra level of challenge comes from enhanced enemy AI. Your devious rival keepers now have more tricks up their sleeves when it comes to amassing gold reserves, such as craftily selling items from their workshops. Enemy characters are also more likely to have their wits about them.

As the expansion was developed quickly, there was seemingly no time to add new creatures, spells or buildings into the mix. This lack of unique content was something GameSpot criticised at the time, arguing, "It doesn't offer a whole lot to someone who already owns *Dungeon Keeper*, and what it does offer probably should have been included in the original game." The reviewer also commented that "there isn't enough here to compel anyone but the most adamant of Keepers". Fortunately for Bullfrog though, there were plenty of adamant Keepers about by this point. Still, perhaps Bullfrog listened to the feedback. The *Deeper Dungeons* was combined with the base game as *Dungeon Keeper Gold* the following year.





» [PC] *Dungeon Keeper Online* was released in China and had *World Of Warcraft* elements.

» [PC] Full 3D graphics were a big technical leap from the first game.

» [PC] Allowing our goblins to level up in the training room.

COMEDY CAPERS

CELEBRATING THE LIGHTER SIDE OF THE SERIES

On a spectrum of sinister to light-hearted, *Dungeon Keeper* games hit just the right tone. "The humour grew from the art and our collective creativity, giving the game its signature blend of dark comedy," Peter states.

For John, there was something quite *Monty Python*-like about hovering your hand over creatures and giving them a big slap. "The slapping was genius. It felt very comedic, this hand coming out of the sky," he laughs. For the sequel, he recalls that, "The animators had a lot of fun in all the incidental animations. There were some standard ones like walking and digging, then some free slots where they could add other actions and inject more personality into the characters." Among these actions were some impressive dance moves. If you happen to play *Dungeon Keeper 2* at 12.58am on a Saturday, your creatures will stop what they're doing and start breaking out some moves to the soundtrack of *Disco Inferno*. "There were loads of Easter eggs," acknowledges Sean.

The well-written scripts of both games were voiced by actor Richard Ridings, who's also known as the voice of Peppa Pig's dad. His booming tones add many moments of mirth, and he reprised this role for both *Dungeon Keeper Mobile* and spiritual successor *War For The Overworld*.

» [PC] Placing turrets gives the second game more of an RTS feel.

CREATE CHAOS

WAYS TO UNLEASH YOUR INNER EVIL OVERLORD

SLAP SENSIBLY

One of the most memorable parts of *Dungeon Keeper* is the ability to slap your minions with your huge spooky hand. It makes them work harder and faster, but drains health points. Get the balance right to avoid fed-up creatures abandoning your dungeon.

INVEST IN IMPS

Imps are there to cover the fundamentals: dig tunnels, claim land and collect gold. Use the Create Imp spell to boost their numbers, and don't forget to give them time in the training room to level up as you would with other creatures.

» [PC] *Dungeon Keeper Mobile* was criticised for revolving heavily around in-app purchases.

development of the characters, which led to them doing some animation trailers for us. I would go to Paris once a month to meet with them and make sure the trailer was going in the right direction. It was a nice two-way process because they would feed back on the characters we were producing in the game."

Did John have any favourite characters? "The Imps were really interesting," he replies. "We ended up making the Mistress and the Horned Reaper the two kinds of hero characters of the piece. In many ways it was one of those projects where it had been so well designed, with each of the character sets, it was like a chess board. The job of the art team was to bring out the strengths and weaknesses of the characters." Also noteworthy on the artistic front was how much the lighting added to the atmosphere. "I think it was one of the first times I worked on a game where the lighting of the effects was visible on the environment," John laughs. "We used the lighting for the fog of war. So as you dug your dungeon, we could light up the space as we went. It lent to this sense of light and dark, the warm colours of fire, all of that kind of cinematic feeling."

Dungeon Keeper 2 included enhanced multiplayer and a sandbox mode called *My Pet Dungeon* among other improvements. Released in 1999, it earned high praise for expanding on the magic of the original. "It's like someone took every different gaming genre in existence and hurled them into a blender, whizzed it up and poured you out a great big helping of all the creamiest, loveliest bits," hailed PC Zone writer Charlie Brooker, who is now much better known for shows like *Screenwipe* and *Black Mirror*. While he and other fans would no doubt have wanted the series to continue in the same deliciously demonic vein, cancellations and a few disappointments followed. A planned PlayStation 2 release of *Dungeon Keeper 2* was shelved. Then the early development of a planned *Dungeon Keeper 3: War For The Overworld* was abandoned in 2000, as EA moved teams onto other priorities including *Harry Potter* games.

> "THE LOVE AND MADNESS THAT THE GAME WAS BUILT UPON PEEKS THROUGH"
> SIMON CARTER

In 2008 the Chinese developer NetDragon released *Dungeon Keeper Online* after acquiring the licence from EA. But this was quite a different beast. A massively multiplayer game with *World Of Warcraft* elements, it didn't reach far beyond China before servers were shut in 2013. The following year, EA released *Dungeon Keeper Mobile* on iOS and Android to a controversial reception, with both fans and critics bemoaning its overuse of microtransactions. The following year brought more positive news. A group of dedicated fans who had met on the Keeper Klan forum and formed Subterranean Games (later Brightrock Games) released *War For The Overworld*. This crowdfunded unofficial spiritual successor was named after the strapline of the abandoned *Dungeon Keeper 3* and had Peter and Simon's approval.

"Seeing a concept you've nurtured continue to evolve is both thrilling and humbling," Peter reflects on the various evolutions of his original idea. "It's incredible to watch new teams bring their own vision to the franchise, even if I don't always agree with the design choices," he adds. So how does he rank *Dungeon Keeper* among his games? "*Dungeon Keeper* is undoubtedly in my top three," he replies. "It holds a special place in my heart, right alongside *Fable* and *Black & White*. Each of those games was a unique creative journey, but *Dungeon Keeper* stood out for its ability to let players revel in their darker instincts while still keeping things playful and strategic."

Simon also has some sage reflections on the enduring appeal of the eclectic series. "*Keeper* was, and is, a slightly crazy project," he contemplates. "It was a sandbox game. A management simulation. A tower defence game. A first-person shooter. It was multiplayer. It had sophisticated AI. It was a fantasy game. It was a comedy. It played with morality – it was good to be bad." With so much packed in, he argues, the game was bound to have broad appeal. But more than anything he adds, "I like to think that the love and madness that the game was built upon peeks through, just a little." ✱

UPSIZE ROOMS

■ Larger rooms will attract a more diverse array of fiends. Bile Demons, for instance, will only enter your dungeon if you provide a big enough lair for them to sleep and a sizeable hatchery for them to guzzle chickens.

PREP FOR PAYDAY

■ On payday, your minions will march en masse to your treasury. Make sure you have enough in the bank by mining for gold. Gem seams can help if you can find one, as they provide a constant stream of income.

SECURE THE KEEP

■ If you allow your Imps some free time between tasks, they will keep busy by fortifying the walls of your rooms and corridors. Between doing this and limiting entry points to your dungeon, you'll be well prepared for an invasion.

retro GAMER's FAVOURITE...

BIRDS IN VIDEOGAMES

As many of you know, Darran is an avid birdwatcher who enjoys birding as much as he enjoys gaming. The crossover may be small, but that hasn't stopped him from compiling this month's list. Just don't mention seagulls...

BANJO-KAZOOIE

If people insist that seagulls are an actual type of bird (they aren't) then we're more than happy to nominate another made-up gull. While several types of Breegull inhabit Breegull Beach, it's the red-crested type we're interested in as one of them is best mates with Banjo. Sure, she can be annoying, but Kazooie also lets Banjo pull off some very special moves.

ANGRY BIRDS

If you were flung at pigs everyday, you'd probably be angry too. While it's great to see that each bird is based on a real-life counterpart, their behaviours are far less accurate. Loons (or divers if you're in the UK) don't explode when they come into contact with things, and emerald toucanets don't fly like boomerangs. Still, at least the game is fun.

EAGLE FLIGHT

We've no idea what a bald eagle is doing living in France, but as it's a post-apocalyptic version of Paris we'll allow it. An early showcase for the power of VR, *Eagle Flight*'s gameplay mechanics may be basic but the game offers an unrivalled feeling of flight. So much so that all bird lovers should experience it.

AGONY

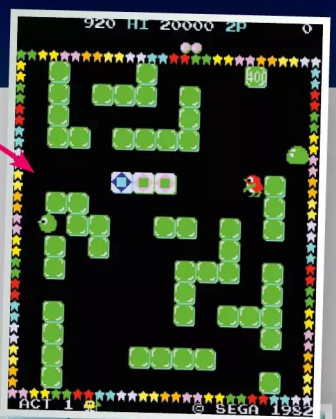
Barn owls are some of the most beautiful birds you can hope to see in the British countryside, so kudos to Art And Magic for making one the star of its game. *Agony* is a beautiful-looking shmup, and while barn owls don't usually have the ability to fire bullets from their beaks, they're not usually transformed wizards either.

DYNAMITE DUX

While we've never seen a mallard punch out a fox before, they're pretty common birds that are easily ignored, so who knows what shenanigans they get up to when we're not looking? What we do know is that *Dynamite Dux* is a terrifically entertaining arcade game that ignores realism in favour of unbridled, wacky fun. Give it a whirl, particularly with a friend.

THE NEWZEALAND STORY

■ Come on Taito, you've only got to open a bird book to know that kiwis aren't yellow and that they don't chuck bombs or fire arrows. Honestly, the amount of in-depth research for an accurate representation of New Zealand's national bird is laughable, but at least Taito remembered that they can't fly, so that's something.

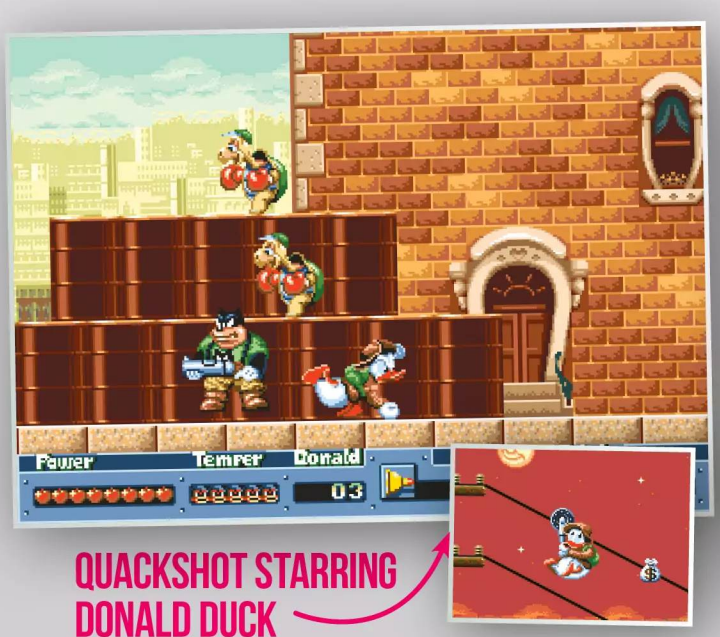


PENGO

■ While penguins have popped up in numerous videogames over the years, from *Super Mario 64* to *Parodius*, the cute star of *Pengo* remains one of our favourites. Don't be fooled by his cute looks however, for Pengo is a psychotic, blood-thirsty bird that won't find peace until he's crushed every last Sno-Bee. Either they're going extinct or he is.

WINGSPAN

■ This might be the newest entry in our list and a board game adaptation to boot, but *Wingspan* is a genuinely brilliant game. It features clever mechanics that stay true to the nature of the birds that utilise them, looks gorgeous and will actually teach you a fair bit about your feathered friends as well. Lovely stuff.



QUACKSHOT STARRING DONALD DUCK

■ Donald Duck has appeared in countless videogames over the years, but *Quackshot* is one of his best adventures. It's a charming globe-trotting adventure that sees Donald teaming up with his friends and using different coloured plungers to help him in his quest. And if you're curious to know what type of duck Donald is, he's a Pekin Duck.

ANIMAL CROSSING

■ Nintendo clearly has a thing about owls, because they often appear in its *Zelda* series. Still, the one we're looking at today is Blathers, the wise custodian of *Animal Crossing*'s museum. You won't be any closer to paying off Tom Nook's debt by donating items to Blathers, but you will learn fascinating facts about them. He's a wise old owl after all.

JOHN VAN RYZIN

From the Apple II to Activision and Absolute Entertainment, John Van Ryzin talks us through his heroic adventures on consoles and computers and how he's back making games for the Atari 2600

Words by Paul Drury

John Van Ryzin began his game-making career with a soldering iron in his hand, creating prototype circuit boards for various toys and gadgets, including early LED handheld, Bank Shot. He moved on to coding games for the Apple II and became one of the founding four members of Activision's East Coast development studio, which produced such fine titles as *Keystone Kapers*, *Crackpots* and John's own masterpiece, *HERO* Indeed, John bears an uncanny resemblance to Roderick Hero, the star of the game, as depicted in the cover art. He would go on to make games across a range of genres and machines, including the C64, NES and Game Boy. "It sure has been a wild ride," he says, laughing – something he does throughout our conversation.

» John proudly displaying some *HERO* memorabilia – and he never liked the *MAD* magazine-style cover of the 2600 box so later versions featured a more Dan Dare-looking Roderick Hero.

If someone had told you in 1984 that you'd still be making Atari 2600 games in 2024, would you think they were mad?
Yes. And I thought I was mad when I agreed to do it.

Apart from insanity, what was the impetus for going back to that old hardware?
Dan Kitchen contacted me and told me that he and his brother Garry and David Crane from Activision were making new game cartridges for the Atari. He showed me their website and this elaborate game they'd made [*Circus Convoy*], I couldn't believe that there were people who would still buy games for the 2600, let alone the concept of going back in time and actually making new games for it.

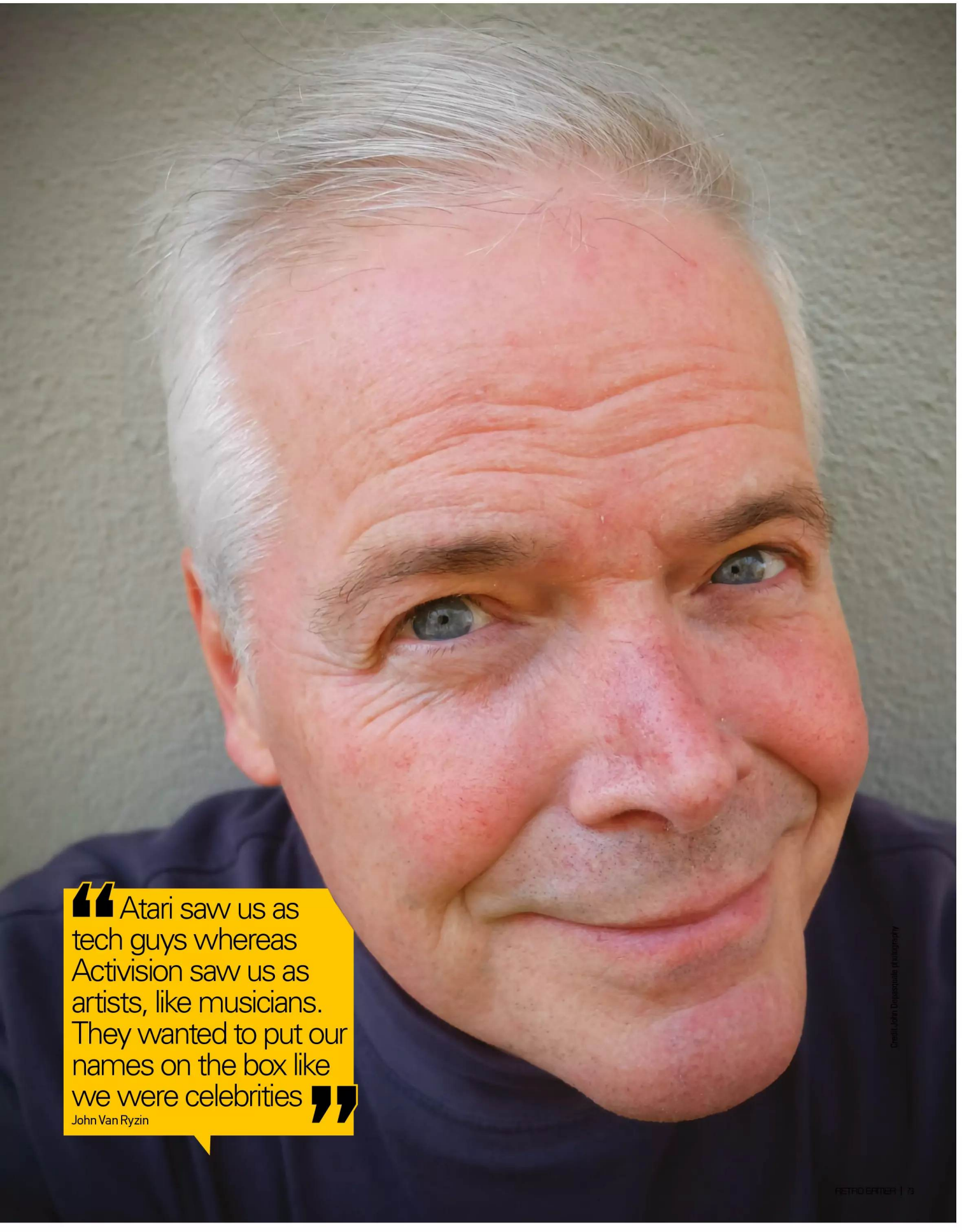
Did you have 'unfinished business' with that console?
Oh yeah, because the first game I made for it [*Cosmic Commuter*] was rejected. I thought I was going to get fired but they just told me to make another one that was more fun. I'd spent too much time making it look good and not working on the fun part so for my second game, *HERO*, I just tried to make it fun.

And it was! Though you're probably best known for *HERO* on the 2600, you actually started on far more basic hardware, working on electronic toys and gadgets at Wickstead Design.
I was an intern there, like a summer job, while I was studying electrical engineering at the New Jersey Institute Of Technology. Wickstead were an industrial design company making consumer electronics and they hired me to construct prototypes of the hardware people had designed. They'd hand me a schematic and a bunch of chips and say, "Make it!" They were inventing some pretty crazy toys… like, they had one where a kid would put on this helmet, so they kind of looked like Darth Vader. It had a loudspeaker on top and when they spoke, it scrambled their voices and only another kid wearing a helmet could understand what they were saying.

We want one!
Ah, it never went into production because they never got it to work [laughs].

You met Garry Kitchen there, who you would later join at Activision.
Yeah, he was working on his second handheld game called *Bank Shot*, a pool game, for Parker Brothers. I worked on some of the prototypes for that and the wiring. I thought he was really smart. He was making cutting-edge stuff plus he'd reversed engineered an Atari 2600. I mean, how did he do that?!

Was Garry the one who got you into programming games?
Yeah, he'd left Wickstead to start his own company. He phoned me up and said he had a contract from Hayden Publishing to make Apple II games and if I bought one and figured out how to make games, he'd give me a job [laughs]. After I'd graduated, I'd been working as an electrical engineer, doing printed circuit board layouts, circuit schematics and assembly language programming, so I bought my own Apple II and I'd go home after this high stress engineering job and try to work out how to program it. And it was really hard! There was no internet – you had to read the manual… ▶


“Atari saw us as tech guys whereas Activision saw us as artists, like musicians. They wanted to put our names on the box like we were celebrities”
John Van Ryzin

SELECTED TIMELINE

- **KAMIKAZE** [1982] APPLE II
- **SHUTTLE INTERCEPT** [1982] APPLE II
- **BELLHOP** [1982] APPLE II
- **HERO** [1984] ATARI 2600
- **COSMIC COMMUTER** [1985] ATARI 2600
- **THE COMPLETE FIREWORKS CONSTRUCTION SET** [1985] C64
- **X-15 ALPHA MISSION** [1987] C64
- **F-18 HORNET** [1988] C64, ATARI 7800
- **HEAVY SHREDDIN'** [1990] NES
- **SPACE SHUTTLE PROJECT** [1991] NES
- **RACE DRIVIN'** [1992] SNES
- **STEEL TALONS** [1993] SNES
- **REN & STIMPY VEEDIOTS!** [1993] GAME BOY
- **SUPER BATTLETANK** [1994] GAME BOY, GAME GEAR
- **ALIEN ABDUCTION** [2024] ATARI 2600

» [Apple II] *Kamikaze* was John's debut release, a simple shoot and dodge affair.

» [Apple II] *Shuttle Intercept* tapped into the interest in NASA's reusable spacecraft, a theme John would revisit later in his career.

» John still has the prototype cartridge of *HERO*, with its original title, *Heli*.

» [C64] Before *Fantavision*, there was *The Complete Fireworks Construction Set*.

» [Atari 2600] *Cosmic Commuter* was actually John's first game for Atari's console, though wasn't released until 1985.

You produced a trio of games for the Apple II, starting with *Kamikaze* in 1982.
I had to come up with something, so I watched this documentary on PBS about kamikaze pilots in World War II and thought, "I'll do that!" I had no idea what I was doing and it was a pretty simple game. I showed Garry the prototype and he offered me a contract straight away, so I quit my job and worked in his basement for royalties. When I told my father that's what I was doing, he really didn't like it… but I never regretted it.

Is this what led to you joining Activision?
Garry had got the contract to make *Donkey Kong* for the 2600 and he could see the market was booming. He knew someone would want his skills but he kind of sold us – that's me, his brother Dan, his brother-in-law, Kevin Calcutt, and Dr Paul Wilson, a physicist who had worked at Wickstead – as a group. He flew out to California to meet with Atari but he really didn't like their attitude. They didn't treat developers well and thought they could put any piece of junk out and make money off it. So he contacted Activision and Jim Levy, the CEO, and Tom Lopez, the vice president of product development, actually came out to Garry's basement to meet us.

That shows a very different attitude to approaching developers.
Oh yeah. I mean, as part of this 'interview', they asked us to pick an Activision game for the 2600 that we were really good at and we had to play it to, like, earn a patch [a physical indication of achieving a high score, awarded by Activision – Needlework Ed]. I picked *Skiing* because my brother and I used to play it all the time and I knew I could easily get the score you needed.

We like their style of interviewing! They clearly wanted people who were passionate about playing games, not just making them.
They saw us as artists, like musicians, whereas Atari saw us as some tech guys. Activision wanted to put our names on the box [of their games] like we were celebrities.

Obviously you passed the interview.
Yeah and they offered me twice the salary I was making at the engineering job I got after college, plus stock options and all these benefits. My dad was totally impressed by that [laughs].

The four of you are given the grandiose title of Eastern Development Center. Are you still based in Garry's basement, though?
[Laughs] Yes, at first, but just while Activision secured office space and rebuilt it with really fancy furniture and private offices. They moved us into there and hired a secretary and office manager. We each had a cubicle where we would work, which would, you know, inspire people to interact, to go try somebody else's game and exchange ideas. Then when you had to think really hard, you could go into your own private office and solve some problem.

What was the relationship like with West Coast? Did David Crane, Steve Cartwright and the other Activision founders ever visit?
Oh yeah, they would come out regularly to meet with us and we would do phone calls and then occasionally we'd go over to them in California. We also saw them at trade shows or on paid family vacations where they'd send the whole company on vacation. It'd be like, "OK, we're all going to Hawaii!" or, "Hey, we're all going to Tahoe to go skiing."

That sounds brilliant!
They were making money hand over fist. They'd fly us out, first class, and have limousines come and pick us up. They treated us like rock stars. I hadn't even made anything for them yet, but they were treating me like I was something special.

Did they actually tell you what game they wanted you to make for them?
That was the weirdest part. I asked them what they wanted me to do and they said, "We just want you to make the best game you can make. You can make anything you want and there's no deadline."

That sounds amazing but also daunting.
It was totally weird, like a surrealistic experience, but yeah it was really daunting because I was competing with the founders of

» Activision really was at the top of its game on the 2600…

> "I got told on some playtests they did that HERO scored higher than Pitfall! I'm like, 'What? Oh, come on. That's weird'"
> John Van Ryzin

Activision, who were considered the masters of the 2600, right? I had to make something to match what they were doing and they'd been doing it for years and had all those hit games. Yeah, it was intimidating.

The game you created was *Cosmic Commuter*, which opens with a *Lunar Lander*-style challenge then a pinch of *Defender* as you blast aliens and rescue people on the ground. Were you looking at arcade titles for inspiration?
Did you ever play *Choplifter*, about picking up little guys and saving them? That's the kind of game I was trying to make. I wasn't really into space games but it did mean I could have a black background [laughs]. Actually, the lunar module you have to land at the start was really complicated to write and to make it burst apart was even more complicated. I got obsessed with making this cool lunar lander thing… and then they rejected the game.

That must have been hard to take.
Yeah, it was, but the experience was the only reason I created *HERO*. That failure completely changed my mindset. I'd totally focussed on making the game look cool and impressing David Crane with my technical ability and I hadn't made a fun game. *Cosmic Commuter* was kind of monotonous.

***HERO* was anything but monotonous.**
It was actually the marketing department who came up with that name. I wanted the guy to have a jetpack, like James Bond did in *Thunderball*, but the animation of the helicopter blades above him was more interesting, so I called the game *Heli*. And instead of being obsessed with graphics, I thought, "If I don't care what it looks like, I can just use big blocks and the game can be about going anywhere you want."

Part of the joy of playing *HERO* is that sense of exploration, venturing deeper and deeper into the caverns. Did you plan the cave system out on paper in advance?
[Laughs] No, I just did it in my head! I would enter numbers to generate 'rooms' and see what they looked like and then try them out, though after I'd made a start on some gameplay, I went on vacation and toured this cave in upstate New York. When I got back, I knew I was going to make the bunches of blocks I had on screen into caverns.

We love all the little details in the game, like accidentally smashing a lantern and the cave being plunged into darkness…
A lot of those embellishments came from my coworkers. I'm sitting there making the game and people would come over and play it. I'd see how they reacted to it or something they said would spark an idea. I remember Dan Kitchen saying, "Oh, when the guy is flying above the river, it'd be cool if an octopus grabbed you." And I was like, "OK." [Laughs]. The game was my idea but I'd never claim I made it all by myself.

Was there a point when you realised you had made something special with *HERO*?

FIVE TO PLAY

Essential games from John's console and computer work

HERO

■ Activision was the master of the 2600 cartridge back in the day and John's cavern caper *HERO* remains one of the console's finest releases. It's a brilliant mix of blasting, blowing stuff up and exploration as you delve ever deeper underground into the depths of the game.

F-18 HORNET

■ A step up from his first C64 combat flight sim, *X-15 Alpha Mission*, *F-18 Hornet* is well presented and fairly accessible as you indulge in bombing raids, aerial duels and accidentally crashing into your aircraft carrier base because it's pretty hard to land.

HEAVY SHREDDIN'

■ Kudos to John for producing the first snowboarding game, a genre that would later thrill us with *SSX* and the like, though the action here is clunky and occasionally bizarre, featuring much dodging of deer and tobogganists.

SPACE SHUTTLE PROJECT

■ An ambitious attempt to simulate the various aspects of flying the space shuttle. Missions include getting astronauts successfully aboard, dangerous spacewalk maintenance tasks and a weird 'shuttle dressage' section.

ALIEN ABDUCTION

■ John's glorious return to 2600 development may have a B-movie theme but offers A-grade gameplay. With detailed visuals and real depth to the alien eradication, to think *Alien Abduction* runs on hardware made in 1977 is mind-blowing.

» [Atari 2600] The mighty *HERO*, John's finest creation and one of the best titles for the machine.

> "I wanted Alien Abduction to look like I'd made it straight after HERO, like it really was made back then"
> John Van Ryzin

APPLE THREE

John's trio of early Apple games

■ Though John will forever be linked with Roderick Hero and the Atari 2600, he began his coding career making games for the Apple II, having three titles published by Hayden Software in 1982. His first release was *Kamikaze*, a fairly basic single-screen shooter, requiring you to destroy various enemy aircraft and dodge the occasional dive-bombing plane. Much to John's surprise, Hayden put the full force of its marketing department behind the game and ran a high-score competition, inviting the top five players to a grand final in San Francisco with a $5,000 prize for the winner. Though John didn't attend, it was enough to convince him there was money in the software business and his next release was *Shuttle Intercept*, which riffed on *Defender* and tied in to the huge interest in America's space programme at the time. His final title for Apple's micro was *Bellhop*, a collaboration with Garry Kitchen. "Garry was making *Donkey Kong* for the 2600 and had this insane deadline," recalls John. "He was working 24 hours a day on that but still had this contract to produce Apple II games so I worked with him on *Bellhop* to speed things up." The game is probably the most interesting for a British audience, given its uncanny similarity to *Wacky Waiters*, released for the Vic-20 in the same year.

» [Apple II] *Bellhop*: a health and safety nightmare.

▶ My only clue was that my co-workers said it was OK to ship it off to California. I was kind of timid, hoping it didn't get rejected like last time. The first inkling I had that *HERO* was going to go into production was I got told on some playtests they did over there, it scored higher than *Pitfall!* I'm like, "What? Oh, come on. That's weird." Then [a few months later], the *TV Guide* arrived at my parents' house when I was visiting them and on the back cover was a full-page ad for *HERO* with "Designed by Jon Van Ryzin".

HERO certainly brought you fame but what about fortune?
[Laughs] I got a bonus and a raise but not a fortune and no fancy car. Activision told me that even though I'd made a successful game, the VCS was fading and my next game needed to be for the Commodore 64.

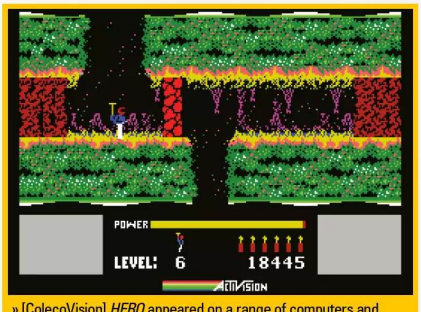
Activision pivoted into making games for home computers, which led to you producing *The Complete Firework Construction Set*. Erm, that's quite a departure from the stuff you'd done before…
I did start making a game for the C64, which had a robot exploring these scrolling tunnels using all kinds of gadgets to defend or attack, but then they told me I had to stop and make something for a computer that wasn't a game. They were talking like videogames were over and nobody wanted this stuff anymore.

Reports of the death of the games industry were indeed an exaggeration and you made some impressive flight sims in the latter half of the Eighties, such as *X-15 Alpha Mission* (1987) and *F-18 Hornet* (1988). What was that like?
That 3D stuff was so hard to learn [laughs]. I got fascinated with it, like, "I'm gonna beat this! I'm going to make this thing work!" And I did, from a technical standpoint, but I don't think they sold very well. It kind of felt like I'd reached my pinnacle with *HERO* and then I was stopped making the games I wanted to make and my whole career got sent down this crazy path.

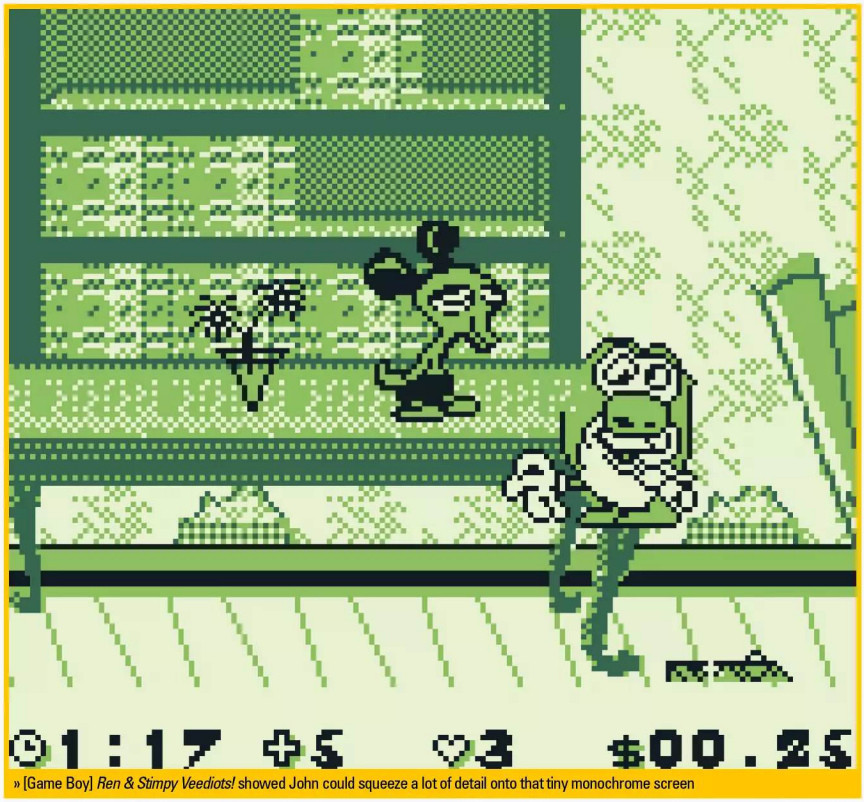
That path did lead you back to consoles and in 1990, you produced *Heavy Shreddin'* for the NES. Were you a snowboarder yourself?
I used to ski in Vermont and started seeing guys on these boards made by Burton and was like, "What the heck is that guy on?" I took one lesson and figured out I couldn't do it but it seemed cool and I could see people would be into it, even if it was just a fad, so I made a game. My friend Bill Wentworth did the art and I worked on the design and programming but the deadline was horrible… I had lots of ambition but not a lot of time. Parker Brothers released it and I remember seeing a TV commercial they'd made [for it] and I'm like, "Oh yeah man, maybe this will be the big one and I'm gonna get rich!" But I didn't.

You follow this with *Space Shuttle Project* (1991), returning to a theme you had first explored in 1982 with *Shuttle Intercept*.
I wasn't trying to make a videogame, I was trying to make something that was a simulation, so you'd understand how the space shuttle actually works. I got all these books about NASA and fixated on this idea that you'd learn something and it would be hard. And maybe not really fun.

You worked on an unreleased game, *Hellfire Run*, which seems to have been lost when Absolute Entertainment, the company you had jointly founded in the Eighties, went bankrupt.



» [ColecoVision] *HERO* appeared on a range of computers and consoles – this Coleco version adds some texture to the caverns.



» [Game Boy] *Ren & Stimpy Veediots!* showed John could squeeze a lot of detail onto that tiny monochrome screen

Ah, that was a 3D helicopter game with combat I was working on for the PC using the first version of DirectX. Then Absolute got a contract to do a PlayStation game and they phoned me up because I'd done 3D games… you see, by this time, I'd sold my shares [in Absolute] and was working freelance in my basement at home. I was, like, "Yeah, someone is finally gonna give me a device that can actually do 3D. This is gonna be the pinnacle of my career!" The game was about 60% or 70% complete when Absolute went bust and I had a lawyer from Sony threatening to kick down my door if I didn't give them the PlayStation devkit back…

So did they end up sending the heavies round then, John?
I told them they could have it and they ended up giving me a job [laughs]. I worked in one of their research labs for a year with some of the guys who created the original PlayStation.

Phew! In the late-Nineties, you take on some conversion work, including porting *Ren & Stimpy* and *Super Battletank* to the Game Boy. What was that like?
That whole part of my career was so strange for me. I was used to making up whatever I wanted and now I had to follow somebody else's thing and it was hard. It's way easier to write a program than to understand somebody else's.

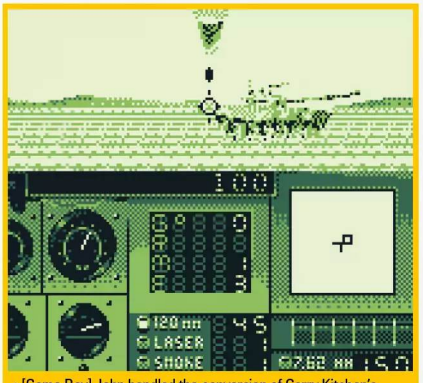
It must have been nice to go back to creating your own thing with *Alien Abduction*, then?
It was like going back in time [laughs]. I had been using things like Unity and making 3D stuff for mobile phones and the web and suddenly I'm back coding in assembly language on the 2600 with, like, no RAM.

***Alien Abduction* has been very well received.**
I've read things online where people have said, "Oh man, this is the best new retro game ever made!" [Laughs] I thought people would just look at the simplistic graphics and the strange controls and think, "I don't get it," but I wanted it to look like I'd made it straight after *HERO*, like it really was made back then.

Can we expect more 2600 games from you?
I've been fooling around with some ideas, experimenting in the same kind of genre, but it's hard, man! It takes a lot of time to do so you gotta have the right idea to make it worth it.

Thanks to Dan Kitchen and Martyn Carroll for additional help.

» [C64] *X-15 Alpha Mission* was one of several combat flight sims created by John and is good fun once you work out how to actually get off the ground…



» [Game Boy] John handled the conversion of Garry Kitchen's *Super Battletank*. Because that's what friends do.

WE DO NEED ANOTHER HERO

John tells us about his recent 2600 game, Alien Abduction

» The promotional poster for John's latest release – Fifties-style art for a game released in the Twenties on a Seventies console.

■ When John returned to coding for the 2600, almost four decades had passed since he had last made a game for Atari's first cartridge-based console. "When I started playing around with the 2600 again, it made me mad that I couldn't do the stuff I could back in the Eighties," admits John. "I kept thinking, 'I did it before, why can't I do it now?' It kind of sucked me in and it wasn't about the money – it was about making *HERO 2* like I'd wanted to back then. I didn't own [the IP] but I did have my own design style so it was me trying to make something fun, as if I'd just finished the original *HERO* and me doing what I would have done next." The theme may be different but *Alien Abduction* perfectly channels the sense of exploration and wonder of its spiritual predecessor, mixing action and strategy as you try to save a princess from extra-terrestrial kidnappers. The level of detail is impressive, both visually and in the sneaky traps and foes that stand in your way. "I was at a retro show in Ohio and met up with Garry and Dan Kitchen and David Crane," smiles John. "I'd not seen them for over a decade but it was like I'd seen them yesterday. People were asking me to sign the [*Alien Abduction*] box and telling me how much they loved *HERO*. It was pretty wild. I was 20 years old when I made the most successful thing I ever made and it was like reliving my childhood fame."

Fancy playing John's new game? You can buy it from Audacity Games (adgm.us) where it's available in various editions. You can also check out the other 2600 titles from this unique retro publisher.

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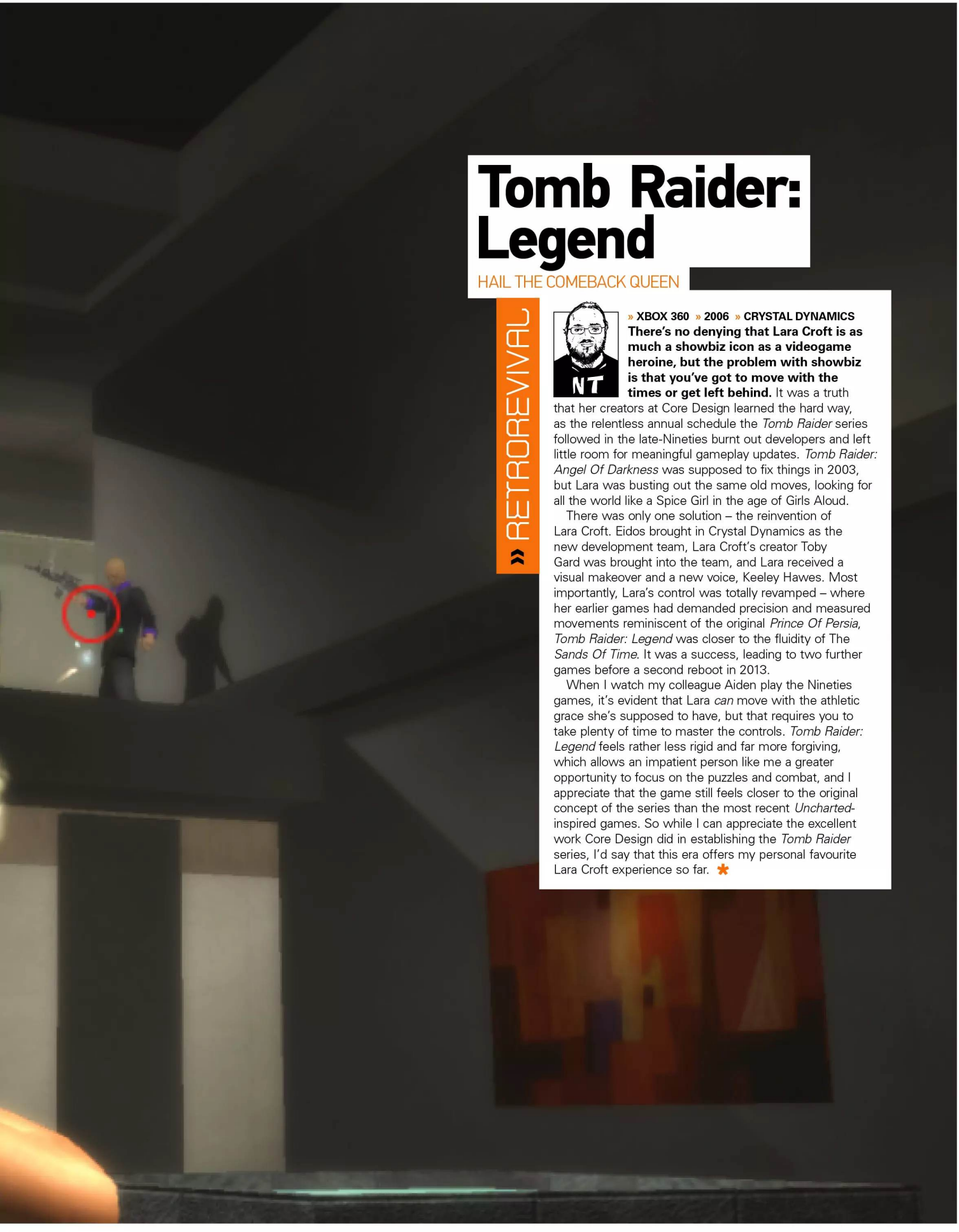
84



Tomb Raider: Legend

HAIL THE COMEBACK QUEEN

» RETROREVIVAL

» XBOX 360 » 2006 » CRYSTAL DYNAMICS

There's no denying that Lara Croft is as much a showbiz icon as a videogame heroine, but the problem with showbiz is that you've got to move with the times or get left behind. It was a truth that her creators at Core Design learned the hard way, as the relentless annual schedule the *Tomb Raider* series followed in the late-Nineties burnt out developers and left little room for meaningful gameplay updates. *Tomb Raider: Angel Of Darkness* was supposed to fix things in 2003, but Lara was busting out the same old moves, looking for all the world like a Spice Girl in the age of Girls Aloud.

There was only one solution – the reinvention of Lara Croft. Eidos brought in Crystal Dynamics as the new development team, Lara Croft's creator Toby Gard was brought into the team, and Lara received a visual makeover and a new voice, Keeley Hawes. Most importantly, Lara's control was totally revamped – where her earlier games had demanded precision and measured movements reminiscent of the original *Prince Of Persia*, *Tomb Raider: Legend* was closer to the fluidity of The *Sands Of Time*. It was a success, leading to two further games before a second reboot in 2013.

When I watch my colleague Aiden play the Nineties games, it's evident that Lara *can* move with the athletic grace she's supposed to have, but that requires you to take plenty of time to master the controls. *Tomb Raider: Legend* feels rather less rigid and far more forgiving, which allows an impatient person like me a greater opportunity to focus on the puzzles and combat, and I appreciate that the game still feels closer to the original concept of the series than the most recent *Uncharted*-inspired games. So while I can appreciate the excellent work Core Design did in establishing the *Tomb Raider* series, I'd say that this era offers my personal favourite Lara Croft experience so far. ✱

» The Spectrum has arrived, and you can see here just how good a job Retro Games Ltd has done with its latest plug-and-play system. Over the page, we've got reviews of Riki 8bit Game Collection, Slopecrashers and more

» This looks like a Spectrum and feels like it too – good work all round.

The Spectrum

REKINDLE YOUR RUBBER LOVE

INFORMATION

- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £89.99
- **PUBLISHER:** PLAION
- **DEVELOPER:** RETRO GAMES LTD
- **BUY IT FROM:** ONLINE, RETAIL

Retro Games Ltd has hit a solid groove with its plug-and-play retro consoles based on classic computers, and its latest is sure to be of interest to many readers. The Spectrum is essentially a full-sized replica of the original model of the machine, with 48 built-in games and support for modern features such as HDMI output and USB controllers. We said it when we played with a prototype of this machine a few months ago, and we'll say it again – the concept feels so obvious that we're amazed that it has taken so long for it to actually hit the market.

» [The Spectrum] Retro Games Ltd has a fairly standard presentation model that hasn't changed for this hardware.

Manic Miner
In this quintessential platformer, help Miner Willy recover wealth from a dangerous mine shaft in Surbiton.
Carefully reach all the keys in a level before the exit. Avoid the Manic Mining Robots. Explore 20 punishing levels. Dont run out of air.
1P
Help
Saved games
Options
Favourite
Sort
Start game
The Spectrum

The joy of using The Spectrum is that it looks and feels like the original machine. The ports on the back are different and the case has to avoid using the Sinclair branding, but at a glance, it's a Spectrum. It feels like one too, thanks to that rubber keyboard. You also get HDMI and USB power cables in the box, but no plug adaptor, as is common these days. The included HDMI cable isn't ridiculously short, but a longer one would have been preferred as you'll likely be sitting wherever the system is placed, unless you're using a USB controller of some kind – and this is something that doesn't come in the box.

In terms of the user experience, Retro Games Ltd hasn't strayed from its usual standard. You get

» [The Spectrum] Why isn't the ski-hire shop on the same side of the road as the slope?

BRIEF HISTORY

» The Spectrum comes from Retro Games Ltd and Plaion, previously behind The 400 Mini, The A500 Mini and The C64 Mini. Like those machines, it's a plug-and-play retro-gaming console with built-in games, but unlike them it is a full-size replica with a functioning keyboard. Unlike projects from other organisations, such as the ZX Spectrum Next, it isn't designed to interface with original ZX Spectrum hardware such as joysticks and cassette decks.

★ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Super Pocket

We don't have room to cover the Super Pockets, but rest assured they're both good buys. I'm loving the Atari version.

NICK

Slopecrashers

Why don't developers do more snowboarding games? Because this makes me wish the *SSX* era had never ended.

» [The Spectrum] Honestly, who would want to go back to school anyway? Not us, that's for sure.

» [The Spectrum] Unlike previous Spectrum plug-and-plays, text input is no problem on The Spectrum.

» [The Spectrum] Surprisingly, *Manic Miner* is here but *Jet Set Willy* isn't included in the built-in 48 games.

720p video output over HDMI, with an authentic 50Hz mode available if your display supports it. You can also apply a CRT filter, choose to use extended ULA Plus colour palettes, and it's possible to customise the amount of the Spectrum screen border that's displayed. In terms of emulation bonuses, you get four save slots per game and the ability to rewind a limited amount of gameplay. Although you don't get a controller in the box, Retro Games Ltd's own six-button pad is supported and plenty of effort has gone into creating custom mappings for it. Various other USB controllers are supported and can be mapped to your liking, and because there are no analogue controls to worry about, there are none of the difficulties we experienced with The 400 Mini.

Speaking of games, the built-in software includes both classic and modern Spectrum titles, with both 48K and 128K games represented. While it's never going to be possible to satisfy everyone with a limited range of games, the selection here features notable titles including *Manic Miner*, *Skool Daze*, *The Hobbit*, *The Great Escape*, *Head Over Heels*, *Match Day II*, *The Lords Of Midnight*, *Avalon*, *Bobby Bearing*, *Saboteur* and *Trashman*. You're unlikely to be familiar with everything on the system unless you're particularly familiar with the homebrew scene, but any fan of the system should recognise a fair few games.

Fortunately, if the included games aren't to your liking, you can just load your own via a USB memory stick. We've had trouble getting Windows to format a USB memory stick to the liking of past Retro Games Ltd systems, so we were pleased to see that the company now offers pre-formatted image files on the system's support page. This solution worked, and we were able to run games without issue – TAP files loaded instantly, and loading of TZX files can be accelerated via a simple setting. We did run into an odd problem where games didn't seem to recognise the joystick unless we went into the mapping menu first, but other than that the process was simple. If you'd prefer a more authentic experience, you can even switch into a Classic Mode and forego the regular games carousel to play around in BASIC.

All of that only really leaves minor issues to complain about. We understand the argument that Retro Games Ltd has made about encouraging players towards an authentic Spectrum experience by not including a controller, but so much effort has gone into mapping the games to work on one that it seems a shame not to – it was easily our preferred way to play. Beyond that, it would have been nice to have a more customisable CRT filter, and perhaps some display frames that had a Spectrum theme to them, even something as simple as a multicoloured stripe in the bottom corner to mimic the keyboard.

In all, Retro Games Ltd has maintained its usual high standards, while addressing our key complaint about The 400 Mini by providing a simplified way to set up USB loading. In doing so, it has ensured that The Spectrum is a more convenient system to use, and should please any fan of the original machine looking for a quick and authentic way to revisit some 8-bit favourites. ✱

✱ BONUS BUNDLES

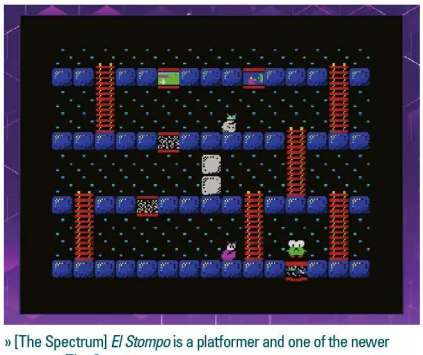
▼ THE SPECTRUM LETS YOU READ OR PLAY

Depending on where you buy The Spectrum, it's possible to get different bonus items with the system. For example, UK buyers will receive a special issue of *Crash* in the box with the machine. In Spain, customers who buy the limited edition from Game will get two free downloadable games – *Wells & Fargo* and *Viaje Al Centro De La Tierra*. If you have the opportunity, it's worth shopping around to see what options you may prefer.

In a nutshell

The Spectrum is a great little device that not only looks and feels the part, but plays the games you want with minimal fuss and plenty of emulation benefits. If you're in the market for it, it comes highly recommended.

>> Score **84%**



» [The Spectrum] *El Stompo* is a platformer and one of the newer games on The Spectrum.

» [The Spectrum] *Ant Attack* retains its unusual atmosphere more than 40 years on.

» [The Spectrum] Beating down the baddies in *Target: Renegade* is still a pretty good time.

★ PICK OF THE MONTH

Quarter Arcades: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles In Time

» **System:** Quarter Arcades » **Buy it for:** £249.99 » **Buy it from:** justgeek.com

If you've got some money to burn now that Christmas is well and truly over, you may want to consider adding Quarter Arcades' *Turtles In Time* to your collection. Just be aware that it's certainly not a cheap proposition and it feels even more premium now that Blaze Entertainment's Evercade Alpha offers more games and Evercade compatibility for a slightly lower price point.

Outside of their console releases, *Turtles In Time*, along with the original *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* remain exclusive to Numskull and it's done a mighty fine job miniaturising the popular arcade games for the home market. In terms of quality it's exactly what you'd expect from the Quarter Arcades range. The build of the cabinet is excellent, the buttons and sticks (despite their minute size) feel extremely durable, there's a reassuring hefty weight to the unit, while the 6-inch screen is a decent size with good viewing angles. That last point is important, as four people can crowd around the tiny unit to replicate the multiplayer mayhem that the arcade original offered.

Like previous cabinets, a single charge will give you roughly one-and-a-half hours of play and there are dip switch settings included, although these are fairly limited, offering only infinite lives and energy and the option to change levels and turn the CRT filter on and off. A volume control is housed on the machine's rear, while USB ports for extra controllers are accessed on the front and discretely covered up when not in use.

There's no denying that this is an extremely desirable unit that is going to impress any fan of the heroes in a half shell, but you're paying a significant sum of money in order to own it. ★

» Score **85%**

» It's going to be cramped with four players, so Numskull's official controller (sold separately for £19.99), or your own controllers, are a good idea.

» The USB ports are discreetly hidden away and easily accessible for when needed.

Riki 8bit Game Collection

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it for:** £17.99
» **Buy it from:** Online, retail

This five-title Famicom collection is actually quite light on games. *Kira Kira Star Night DX* is an action game in which you jump around and grab falling stars, while *Astro Ninja Man DX* is a shoot-'em-up in which your drones function as health. The rest of the package consists of the chiptune albums *8bit Music Power* and its *Final* and *Encore* sequels, featuring tunes from the likes of Motoaki Furukawa (*Gradius*), Tomoya Tomita (*Castlevania* series), Junya Nakano (*Final Fantasy X*) and ZUN (*Touhou* series). The games are both well presented but quite simple and rather brief, so this is best enjoyed by music lovers who really treasure that Famicom sound.

NICK THORPE

» Score **71%**

Evercade: Toaplan Arcade 4

» **System:** Evercade family » **Buy it for:** £17.99
» **Buy it from:** Online, retail

Blaze's last release of 2024 is another collection of Toaplan games and while it doesn't reach the heights of the previous three carts you'll still want to add it to your collection. Six of Toaplan's deepest cuts are included, including three shmups: *Dogyuun*, *Grind Stormer* and *Sky Shark*, and they're all great blasters. That leaves *Snow Bros 2*, an entertaining single-screen action game, the fighter *Knuckle Bash*, and *Pipi And Bibi*'s, an interesting take on *Elevator Action* with an adult theme. The presentation and emulation is of Blaze's usual quality and a selection of stickers are included alongside the usual full-colour manual. It's arguably the weakest Toaplan collection, but it's still a lot of fun.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **81%**

Slopecrashers

» **System:** PC » **Buy it for:** £14.99
» **Buy it from:** Steam

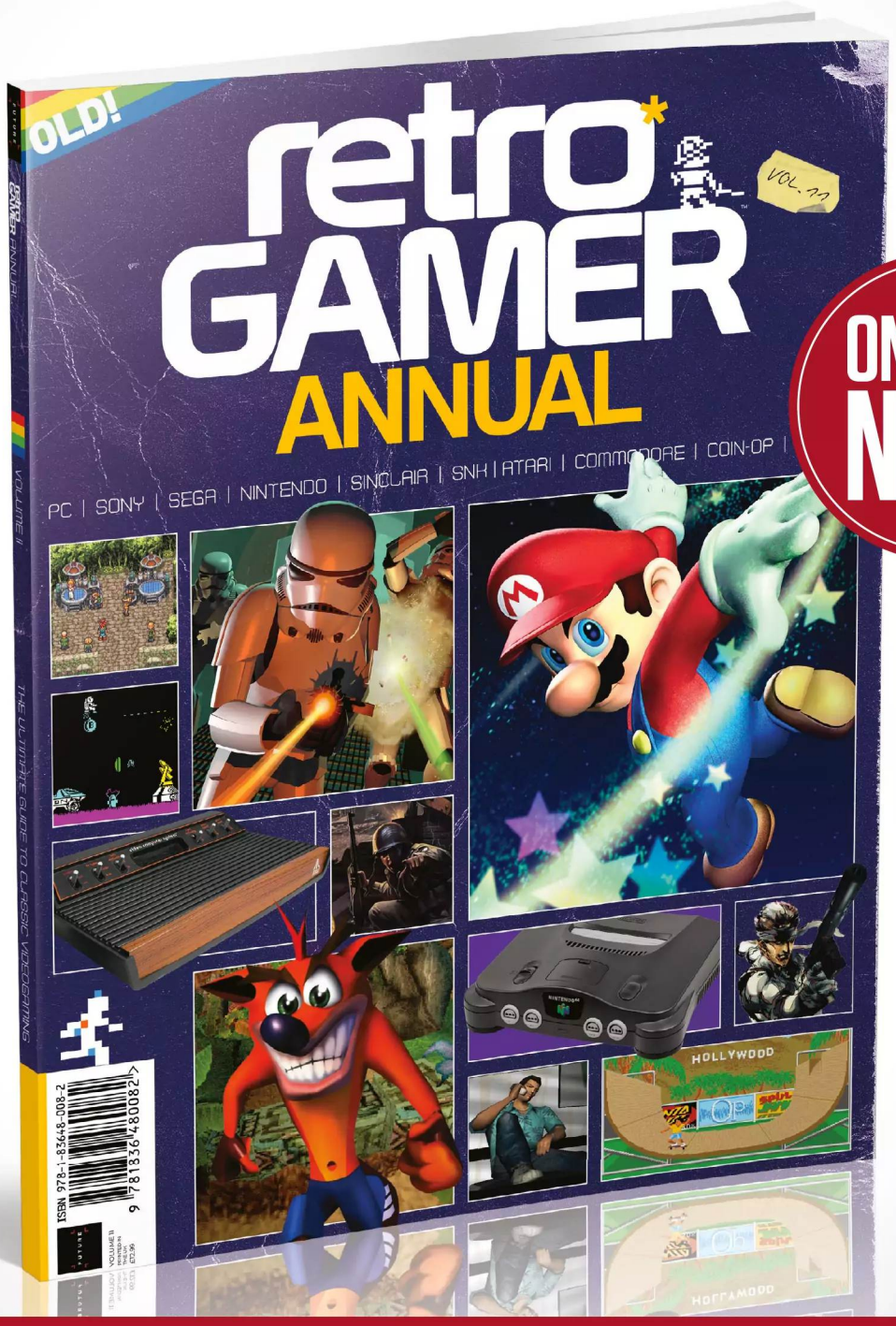
A menagerie of cartoon critters race one another in this indie snowboarding game from solo developer Byteparrot. There's clear inspiration from *Mario Kart* in the variety of weapons and fantastical tracks on offer, while the way you perform tricks to build up a speed boost gauge is reminiscent of *SSX*. The presentation is nothing special and the weapon balance could do with a little tweaking, but the handling is satisfying and it's nice and challenging. As well as offering both online and local multiplayer, the game has plenty for solo players to get stuck into, with varied tasks throughout the Campaign mode. A welcome surprise for fans of extreme sports games.

NICK THORPE

» Score **80%**

CELEBRATE THE BEST OF RETRO GAMING IN 2024

Our latest tome features an incredible amount of fantastic content from Retro Gamer's past 12 months. Iconic characters, huge franchises and classic systems all feature, making it an essential read for retro fans. Don't miss it!



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THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>

<!--- TOP ROW: TAKAYUKI KOMABAYASHI (DIRECTOR) AND HIROKI KODAMA (PRODUCTION DESIGN); BOTTOM ROW: SATOSHI FUJISHIMA AND TAKAYUKI HIRONO (PROGRAMMERS); CENTRE: A BOWL OF SUKIYAKI. --->

<INTRO> WELCOME TO ANOTHER COLUMN, WHERE WE TRIED SOMETHING DIFFERENT WITH CERTAIN SCREENSHOTS THIS MONTH. THE JAGUAR GAME JUMPING AT SHADOWS WAS REVIEWED ON REAL HARDWARE (THANKS TO MY FRIEND WAYNE FOR THE GAMEDRIVE) AND SCREENSHOTS WERE TAKEN FROM THE SCREEN, WHILE OUR FEATURED NES TITLE HAS SCREENSHOTS THAT SIMULATE HOW IT WILL LOOK ON A REAL CRT. THE BEST WAY TO SEE THESE TITLES IS ON THE REAL HARDWARE, SO BUY THEM WHEN AVAILABLE! </INTRO>

<MAIN HEADER>

ESTIQUE EXCELS

<INTRO> JAPANESE DIRECTOR TAKAYUKI KOMABAYASHI HAS ASSEMBLED A SELECTION OF SHMUP VETERANS FOR HIS NEW NES SHOOTER CHANGEABLE GUARDIAN ESTIQUE </INTRO>

<BODY> **Takayuki Kombayashi's new shmup appears to be covering all the genre's bases.**

"*Estique* is the dream game to develop because there are transforming robots, girls, and many things I want in one horizontal shooting game," we're told. He cites, "*Side Arms*, *Thexder*, and *Volguard II*," as inspiration, while the game's plot is based on the lesser-known *Equites* by Sega/Alpha Denshi; a vertically scrolling 1984 coin-op featuring a transforming mecha. "Since I am a PCB collector, I mainly play arcade games in my house – or go to game centers such as Akihabara Hey, more than playing NES games," we're told. So what drew him to developing a new console game? "If a good game runs on real consoles, I think it stands out well and sells a certain number. For the Famicom, I thought it wouldn't take that long to develop compared to Mega Drive or other [systems]." Kombayashi's game is developed in machine code, the tools used include ASM6 and Famistudio.

The team communicated through Skype and occasionally met up in Ikebukuro or Akihabara as work progressed. Shmup legend Takayuki 'Jemini' Hirono (*Zanac*, *The Guardian Legend*, and *Gun-Nac*) is the game's programmer. "Double buffering made it possible to suppress flickering. The [lack of] slowdown is the result of the continuous implementation of light loads by Jemini," says Kombayashi, "while [ex-Compile member] Satoshi 'Pac' Fujishima is also contributing to the coding."

The story and character design are by Hiroki 'Daigattai' Kodama (*Power Strike II*, *Spriggan Mark 2*) another shmup veteran. "All I heard was 'transforming robot' so I picked up on something I thought Takayuki Komabayashi might like and designed it," he tells us. "*Estique*'s head came from *Thexder*. For the heroine Mary, it's a modern take on the Eighties and Nineties cartoon template. When the game's groove was decided upon, it was modified slightly. At first, it was roughly decided that each stage would be based on a real city on Earth, so I tried to make the design as easy to understand as possible so that each country would have its own unique characteristics. The current design was finalised after a discussion with the director. From

COPING WITH CHANGES

FIGHTER FORM

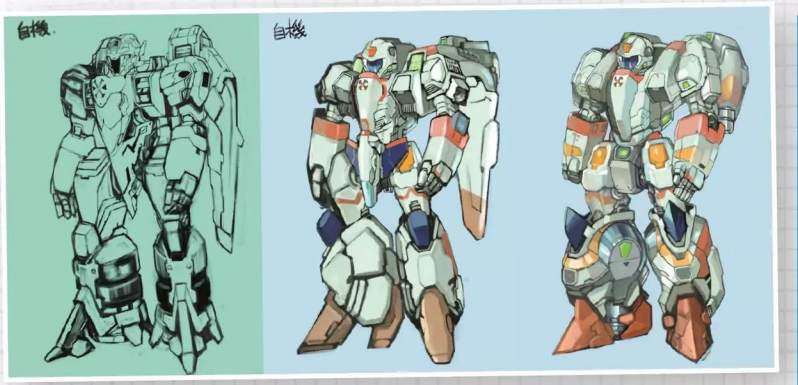
<The fighter form takes scenery damage and recharges its shield much slower that its robot counterpart. />

ROBOT FORM

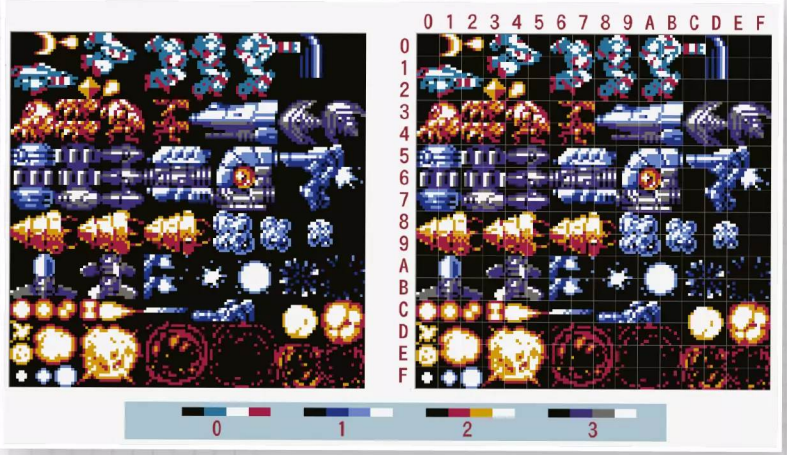
<The robot form recharges shield energy quicker and doesn't take damage from the scenery but can be 'pushed' off the screen. />

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**



<!--- [NES] THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COVER ARTWORK.. --->



<!--- [NES] A SPRITESHEET SHOWING THE INDIVIDUAL FRAMES AND PALETTES USED. --->

<!--- [NES] ONE OF THE HUGE MAYORS (END-OF-LEVEL BOSSES) YOU WILL FACE. --->

there, I made adjustments based on reactions and field tests." Artist Yamatan also worked on stage design and in-game graphics. "The stage design was first created in rough form according to the image memo from Kodama-san and then finalised reflecting the opinions of the others," Yamatan says. "Unlike in the past, the graphics tools are much more responsive, and the tablet pens are very easy to use and draw with, which is very helpful." *Estique*'s visuals are complemented by a superb soundtrack by Shinichi Sakamoto, Shinji Hosoe, Ayako Saso and Sakuoki Kudo (sdhizumi). The end result is an astounding Famicom tour de force. Broke Studio is preparing to unleash the finished game in cartridge form, so stay tuned for an **RG** review. </BODY>

<INTRO> HOW TO MASTER THE CHANGEABLE GUARDIAN </INTRO>

SUPER WEAPON

Double-tap A to launch the super weapon (fighter) or punch (robot), with available charges shown as bullets in the score panel. />

B IS FOR BIT

Pick up B for the rotating BIT satellites, which can handily block incoming damage from enemy bullets. />

W IS FOR WAVE

Pick up W for the 3-Way Wave weapon, giving you a wider field of fire, which comes in very handy. />

NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

Amstrad CPC: Save the town of Kismet, Texas in Mananuk's *Monster Mayhem*. Your quest starts at bit.ly/monstermayhem-cpc Good news too as *Mighty Street Fighter* is due to launch soon. Get scrapping at amstrad-ggp.itch.io />

BBC Micro: Games That Weren't and Dave Moore helped recover the lost Mikro-Gen game *Cruise Attack* from 1984, inspired by *Missile Command*. Discover it at bit.ly/cruiseattack-bbc />

C64: *Peggle* fans, check out *Orbix* by fleischgemuese, where you must eliminate all the orange Orbz. You can find it at bit.ly/orbix-c64 />

Game Boy Color: Shane McCafferty (interviewed in **RG** 264) released the follow-up to *Hoonigans*, a 3D racer with *Out Run*-style junctions called *Nitro* (top left). Take it for a spin at thalamusdigital.itch.io />

Mega Drive: old_pirate has converted Matt Hughson's excellent puzzle game *From Below* (top right). Clear lines of blocks but watch out for the octopus pushing them up from below! Get puzzling at bit.ly/frombelow-md />

MSX2: *Cube Droid Saves The Galaxy* is an excellent *Soko-Ban*-style game from Bits of Bas. Download it from bit.ly/cubedroid-msx2 />

NES: RetroSouls released a brilliant conversion of its puzzle platformer *Old Towers*. Get climbing at bit.ly/oldtowers-nes />

PC: Spectrum icon Mr Hair appears in Langford Productions' *A Very Hairy Christmas*. You'll find it at bit.ly/hairychristmas-pc />

PLUS/4: Commodore Plus/4 Hungary is running a coding competition, for BASIC and machine code, closing on 31 March 2025. There's more info at plus4gamedev.hu />

Vectrex: *Raid Under Vectrexia* by John A Reder puts you in control of a submarine. Explore its depths at bit.ly/vectrexia2 />

ZX Spectrum: *Take My Hand* from Sequentia Soft is a text adventure inspired by A-Ha's classic *Take On Me* video. Groove on over to bit.ly/takemyhand-zx />

CHAMPION CODER

BRIAN 'MORNING TOAST' VAUGHN

<INTRO> PROGRAMMING SINCE HE DISCOVERED QBASIC IN SEVENTH GRADE, BRIAN IS AN ENTHUSIASTIC PICO-8 ADVOCATE </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: COLUMBUS, OHIO IN THE USA WEBSITE: MORNINGTOAST.ITCH.IO/ FORMAT: PICO-8 PREVIOUS GAMES: STEEL HUNTER, BUSTIN', INVADER OVERLOAD WORKING ON: CHAIN OF HERCULES, TINY GUNNER, MANDALORIAN-THEMED GAME />

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN USING THE PICO-8, BRIAN?

Since 2016 when I got a PocketCHIP. I was hoping it would become what the Playdate is today. The built-in tools are very handy, but I mostly use Pyxel Edit for art and VS Code. I don't typically use any post-processors or other plug-ins.

<!--- BRIAN RECENTLY UPDATED STEEL HUNTER WITH A NEW EVASION TACTICS HIGH-SCORE MODE. --->

WHAT INSPIRES YOUR GAMES?

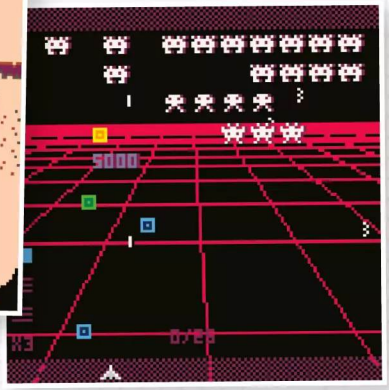
Sometimes it just starts as a cool title when chatting and joking with my family. Other times I'll see a game (often in **Retro Gamer**) with a fun mechanic and think about how I could use it. *Steel Hunter* was one where I played the old Atari game *Sea Chase* and had fun but felt it could be more. I took its core concept and added to the story with some new action.

WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

I'm always bouncing between several projects. My most recent is a hook-and-spin shmup with the working title *Chain Of Hercules*, while another is a *Mandalorian*-themed game where you escort baby Yoda through a maze. There's also one that has the player manning a turret to stop an onslaught of aliens while saving colonists. I try to finish at least one game per year, so we'll see which one gets far enough along to get released next.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR DREAM PROJECT OR COLLABORATION?

Shmups and bullet hells have been a lifelong love, and I haven't really made one yet. Racing/driving is also a favourite genre that I haven't tried. Working with one of the outstanding pixel artists would be a lot of fun. Teaming with a musician would be a bonus. The PICO-8 community often feels like one big collab because it's filled with great folks who love to share, help, and play. None of my games would have crossed the finish line without the support of many people I'll probably never meet. The PICO-8 scene is one I'm proud to be a part of.



<!--- [PICO-8] THE EXCELLENT INVADER OVERLOAD INGENIOUSLY USED BACKGROUND EFFECTS FROM A 1K PROGRAMMING JAM. --->

<!--- [PICO-8] GUIDE THE CHILD THROUGH A DANGEROUS DESERT AVOIDING FIRE FROM STORMTROOPERS IN BRIAN'S INCOMING GAME. --->

DATABURST

JUMPING AT SHADOWS

<INFO FORMAT: ATARI JAGUAR CREDITS: REBOOT (CJ, ANDERLEX, ROALD STRAUSS), PHYSICAL CART BY ATARIAGE PRICE: TBC WEB: BIT.LY/JUMPINGATSHADOWS (DEMO) / ATARIAGE.COM (PHYSICAL) />

<BODY> **In a dystopian future, our hero is imprisoned by robots – but two friendly droids called LAURA and ERNIE teach him how to escape.** You can jump and double-jump and can utilise a handy dash move (horizontally or vertically), but it does take a couple of seconds to recharge. Contact with robots, their bullets, spikes, and electric fields will kill you, sending you back to the start of the level or the last activated checkpoint. Moving platforms and Bounce Bots help you reach higher areas, while keycards are needed to open locked doors. At the end of each section is a portal activated by collecting Orbs. Escaping leads to a hub with multiple portals needing a minimum number of Orbs; levels contain extra Orbs, so revisit levels to pick up more with progress saved to the cart.

This devious puzzle platformer draws on hits such as *Super Meat Boy* and *Celeste*. The graphic style is excellent, with brilliant lighting effects such as red alert bulbs, mist, and darker sections to explore. The robots are cutely animated – especially the large boss robot when it falls apart, while the music throughout is superb with some great FX. The difficulty level is high throughout, but it's so satisfying when you make it through a section in this impressive Jaguar release that we don't mind. </BODY>

SCORE: 87%

<!--- [ATARI JAGUAR] LAURA WAITS TO GIVE YOU HELPFUL INFORMATION. --->

<!--- [ATARI JAGUAR] DAMAGE THIS LARGE ROBOT BY JUMPING ON ITS HEAD AND BLOWING IT UP WITH A BOMB. --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

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<!--- [ATARI XL] RUNNER-UP DIMO'S UNDERWORLD DREW INSPIRATION FROM LYNX CLASSIC CHIP'S CHALLENGE. --->

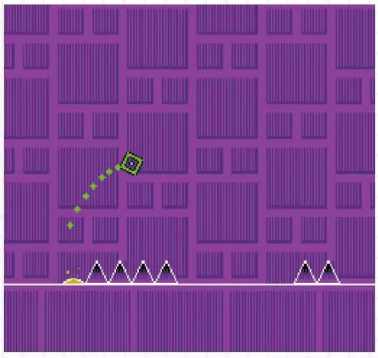
<!--- [ATARI XL] THE WINNER, RUFF IN TROUBLE, HAD EXCELLENT GRAPHICS BASED ON THE AMIGA GAME RUFF 'N TUMBLE. --->

ABBUC SOFTWARE COMPETITION 2024

<INFO FORMAT: ATARI 8-BIT CREDITS: ABBUC AND CREATORS PRICE: DOWNLOADS AVAILABLE TO CLUB MEMBERS $ ELSEWHERE WEB: BIT.LY/ABBUC2024-THREAD (ATARIAGE) / ABBUC.DE (CLUB) />

<BODY> **The German Atari user group ABBUC held its annual software competition, with prize money shared amongst the 11 entries.** Special mention to flight sim *F-16 Falcon Strike* by Jaroslaw 'Roeoender' Wosik, with its detailed controls and cutscenes earning fourth spot. Third place went to puzzle platformer *Twist Of Souls*, an adaptation of Fran Fox's *Ludum Dare 43* entry, while *Dimo's Underworld* finished in second place, with the cute character collecting sweets, solving puzzles, and avoiding monsters. The winner was Shanti77 with the impressive *Ruff In Trouble*; its large scrolling levels and great graphics saw Ruff collect magic orbs to open the exit gate. Well done to all those taking part. </BODY>

<!--- [NES] OUR PREVIEW IN RG 262 PREPARED US FOR THIS ROCKET OF A GAME.. --->



<!--- [NES] CLEVER COURSE DESIGN MEANS YOU DON'T ALWAYS NEED TO USE THE BOUNCE PADS. --->

FAMIDASH

<INFO FORMAT: NES CREDITS: KANDOWONTU AND TEAM PRICE: FREE DOWNLOAD WEB: RHPZ.ORG/FAMIDASH />

<BODY> ***Geometry Dash* is a superb endless runner-style game, and this NES conversion is incredibly accurate.** Twelve of designer RobTop's levels have been painstakingly recreated, with ultra-smooth pixel scrolling, an authentic palette, and fantastic chiptune adaptations of the music. You can also practice each course, laying down a checkpoint to repeat a tricky part. There are coins to grab and extras to unlock, plus the latest update has added multiple community levels to challenge you further. This is an outstanding conversion that will be heading to Kickstarter for a physical release. </BODY>

SCORE: 90%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> PAUL NICHOLLS (SYNTAXERRORSOFTWARE.ITCH.IO/) IS WORKING ON SEVERAL C64 PROJECTS, INCLUDING HIS OWN ROGUELIKE – ROGUE-ISH 64 </INTRO>

<BODY> **Another homebrew gem inspired Paul's new game.** "I saw *Rogue64* which I thought was cool," he tells us. "I came across the PICO-8 roguelike video tutorials about building a game, called *Porklike*, by Krystian Majewski." Paul's other inspiration was the closed online game *Marvel Avengers Alliance*. "I was addicted to it. In that game, you have status effects buffs/debuffs like healing, burning, poisoned etc, which I included in my roguelike as I loved that sort of thing."

Paul's development environment is his Pascal cross-compiler, Pas6502. "I use Charpad/Spritepad professional editions for graphics, Visual Studio Code for non-Pascal assembly coding, and Kick Assembler for all my 6502-based coding." So what is left to do? "Reduce memory usage so I can add in a title-screen tune. Maybe have an ending, there isn't one yet." The game will be released digitally first, "Physical would be a big plus/bonus!" before he turns to other projects. "I would still like to get back to my other projects: *Monster Match*, *Hexed*, and *miniMIKE* – and get those out the door!" </BODY>

<!--- [C64] USING THE BOW AT A DISTANCE, THIS ONE HAS A +3 BONUS AND THE 'BURNING' BUFF FOR EXTRA DAMAGE. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

» [Mega Drive] *NBA Jam Tournament Edition* is a great conversion, especially once you get four players involved.

COUCH COIN-OP

We discuss our memories of the Mega Drive's arcade offerings

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

» [Mega Drive] We'd love to know the definitive reason why games like *Shadow Dancer* were heavily reworked.

With this month's cover feature reflecting on how Sega's 16-bit hit brought the arcade experience home, we thought it was a good time to get together and reminisce on how the console delivered our favourites from the amusements – or at least attempted to.

DARRAN

How important were arcade conversions in the Mega Drive's early years?

NICK

I think they were perhaps the biggest part of establishing the machine's identity. It's no coincidence that *Altered Beast* was bundled with the console, and then you had games like *Golden Axe*, *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* and *Strider*.

TIM

Yeah, pretty important because they were very close to what you'd see in the arcades graphics-wise. So it was almost like having the arcade game in your home.

DARRAN

Strider is a good example. We now know that it's not quite the arcade-perfect port many were claiming at the time, but it still managed to look way beyond what traditional home systems were offering. Does anyone have a particularly favourite conversion?

> "They were close to what you'd see in the arcades. It was like having the arcade game at home"
>
> TIM EMPEY

NICK

Even though it doesn't have the multiplayer of the arcade original, *Mercs* is a really good one. Not only does it look good and play well, but the Original Mode is a great addition with brand-new levels.

TIM

Street Fighter II: Special Champion Edition for me, it was even better when the six-button controller came out. Also *NBA Jam Tournament Edition* got a heck of a lot of play with some friends back then.

DARRAN

Good shouts from both of you. *Strider* is obviously the big one for me, but Nick's mention of *Mercs* is a good one as so many early arcade conversions often had great extras. The Original Mode in *Super Hang-On* was superb for example. Can anyone remember any other enhanced arcade conversions?

NICK

Super Monaco GP was never going to match the arcade machine for sprite scaling, so the World Championship Mode was a really smart addition. *Fatal Fury*'s two-player mode also let you play as the characters that were CPU-only in the arcade.

DARRAN

I didn't realise that about *Fatal Fury*. Why do we think so many games on the Mega Drive were sequels to arcade games?

TIM

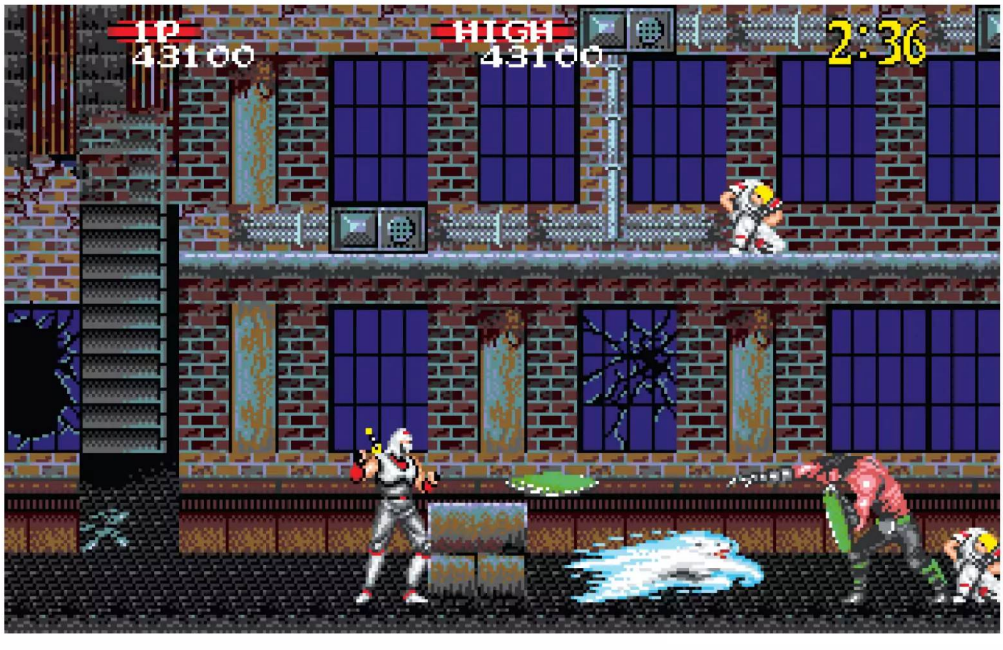
Money! Recognised IP and it's probably easier to do a Mega Drive game than a new arcade machine.

NICK

Also, when you think about games like *The Revenge Of Shinobi* and *Space Harrier II*, the original arcade games were already a few years old when the Mega Drive sequels hit. I guess Sega might not have wanted to be seen to be rehashing games that had already been out on the Master System for ages.

DARRAN

I remember everyone raving about *The Revenge Of Shinobi* on release due to the graphics



being better than the arcade version, but the pace of the game put me off it for ages. It is a great game, I just couldn't initially see that. Why do we think some Mega Drive games like *E-Swat* and *Shadow Dancer* ended up being completely different to the original releases?

NICK

That legitimately baffles me, as they seem a lot more manageable on the Mega Drive than some of the games that were actually chosen for conversions. Maybe the arcade originals were seen internally as being a bit underwhelming? That's purely speculation, though.

DARRAN

I always found them to be odd decisions as well. There were a lot of great shmup adaptations on the Mega Drive, although they were fairly barebones. Did you play any of them, Tim?

TIM

Forgotten Worlds (though I might have played that on the Amiga) and *Gain Ground*, I flipping love *Gain Ground*. And, though I don't think I played it, *Slap Fight*'s name always amused me.

DARRAN

Actually, *Slap Fight* is another cracking conversion that includes a brand-new game in it. It's actually getting a re-release soon as well. *Gauntlet IV* is also a good version, and it's M2's very first game I believe.

NICK

I really liked *Hellfire*, just for the cool weapon system. Did either of you ever find yourselves particularly disappointed by a conversion? *OutRunners* always stood out to me as the developers reaching way beyond the machine's capabilities.

TIM

Pit-Fighter. I wanted to complete it because it was near impossible on the arcade, but once I had it home I really just couldn't be arsed with its rubbish controls.

» [Mega Drive] Games like *Golden Axe* were particularly important to the early Mega Drive experience.

DARRAN

Pit-Fighter was pretty terrible. I think the most disappointing for me was *Super Thunder Blade*. It was a launch game, but it was so jerky, I was so gutted when I played it. Has anyone been keeping an eye on the homebrew arcade conversions that people are making?

NICK

Yeah, I have. There's some great work going on – as well as mods that improve existing conversions like *Super Street Fighter II*, there are really cool projects like *Real Bout Fatal Fury Special*, *R-Type* and *Final Fight*.

DARRAN

I heard that mod unlocks something when you finish *Super Street Fighter II* on the highest difficulty, Tim. You should give it a try, lol.

TIM

Why you… grrrr!

DARRAN

Sorry, I couldn't resist! ✱

» [Mega Drive] There are many great shooters available, and Nick has a soft spot for *Hellfire*.

» [Mega Drive] That first stage music for *Gain Ground* is pretty memorable, there's no questioning that.

» [Mega Drive] Unfortunately for Tim, the *Pit-Fighter* conversion is a bit sad and a bit crap.

READERS REACT

How important were arcade conversions to your Mega Drive experience?

Brian Vaughn
Arcade ports were very important to me and my friends on Genesis but mostly around the co-op games… *Mortal Kombat*, *NBA Jam*, *Terminator 2*, etc. We'd survive a whole summer on one game. Going to the arcade was a rare treat so those ports were as close as we got.

JazzFunkBass
I played *Golden Axe* arcade in a pub in London with a couple of mates when we were about 17 and from that day it was my mission to purchase a Mega Drive once it was released specifically to get that damn game!

Graham Hanks
For me it's the non-arcade games that shine the most. I don't think *Streets Of Rage 2* would have been of the quality it was if it was designed around munching coins. Also *Phantasy Star IV* and *Shining Force II* were the two RPGs that got me into the genre and are still high watermarks.

Welcome to 199X
My local arcade was mostly ticket games, so I ate up any arcade stuff I could get. Once I had my own money and started collecting in the 2000s, I sought out arcade titles because it was hard to find cabinets anywhere nearby. Plus, who didn't want to play *Street Fighter* at home?

Makopowered, PhD
I was initially drawn to the machine for *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Spider-Man*, but the original *Mortal Kombat* was a tide shift – it was hugely important to me, and was followed up with arcade ports like *NBA Jam* and *Virtua Racing*.

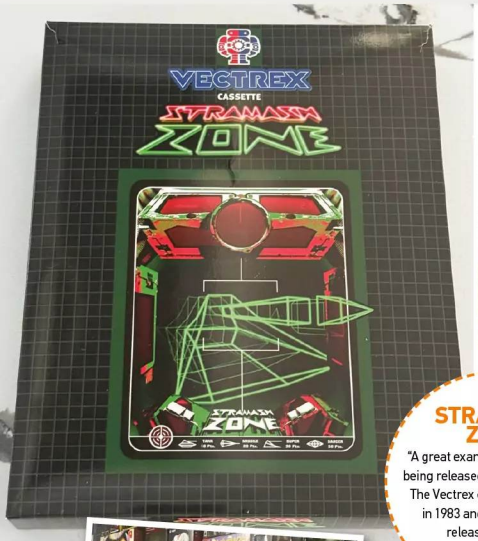
Bens Jammin
To my young, innocent, naive eyes all the coin-op conversions were arcade perfect so it was definitely something I would target. I even thought *Pit-Fighter* was exactly like the arcade!

Jason Heeley
I had pretty much zero interest in arcade conversions, being far more drawn to different corners of the Mega Drive's library. *Decap Attack*, *Granada X*, *Thunder Force III* and *IV* and *Starflight* spring immediately to mind.

ZenoEvil – Meaning Machines
When I got my grey import Mega Drive for Xmas '89 it was all about the near arcade-perfect games from Japan. I soon had *Golden Axe*, *Strider*, *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* etc.

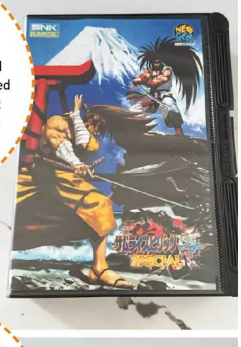
COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

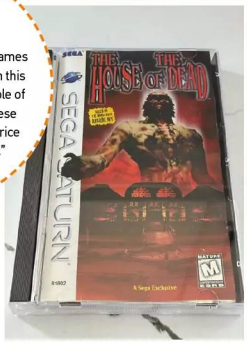


STRAMASH ZONE
"A great example of new games being released for an old system. The Vectrex ceased production in 1983 and this game was released in 2018."
PAID: $40

SAMURAI SPIRITS ZERO SPECIAL
"One of the first games I picked up for the Neo Geo when I started collecting for it. This is the last official game released for the Neo Geo console in 2004."
PAID: $500



THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD
"I am a huge fan of lightgun games and there are few better than this classic. This is a great example of being able to get the Japanese version at a fraction of the price of its Western equivalent."
PAID: $200



BIO

NAME:
James Berman

LOCATION:
New York, USA

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
$130,000

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Dreamcast

FAVOURITE GAME:
Alan Wake

YOUTUBE:
@DepecheSA

EASTERN DELIGHTS

James Berman on his love for collecting Japanese consoles

Our latest collector grew up in South Africa where the console market was "virtually non-existent, with only a few individuals owning 2600s, until the arrival of the Mega Drive". It was Sega's 16-bit system that allowed James Berman to fall in love with console gaming and it proved to be quite the upgrade after owning a ZX Spectrum in his youth.

Like many gamers, James would sell his existing collection to fund a new one. "In my 40s, my passion for retro gaming took hold. I believe this resurgence was influenced by three key factors: first, I moved to the States, where many of these systems are readily available; second, I started listening to a gaming podcast that introduced me to consoles I had never heard of before; and third, I finally had sufficient disposable income."

As a result James now has quite the sizeable collection with over 30 unique systems. That collection includes a large number of handhelds, including numerous Game & Watch releases. "My Game & Watch collection has mostly been sourced from Japan, where the systems are generally in much better condition than those available in the West," says James, before noting that there's been a general increase in prices lately. James also feels that modifications are worth considering. "A great example is the IPS mod for the GBA, which makes the screen much more vibrant, or the SD card mod for the Vita, which significantly increases its internal storage capacity."

When it comes to favourite systems, James remains a big fan of Sega's Dreamcast, saying, "Sega threw caution to the winds and came up with unique and innovative games. It was also probably the last console that had a significant number of arcade-perfect games. Even today you have access to a large number of great games that are still relatively affordable".

That last point can't be said for SNK's Neo Geo AES, which sits at the more expensive end of James' extensive collection. After enjoying the system in arcades, James admits it was one of the first he started collecting for and now has over 80 games, including complete sets for *Samurai Shodown*, *Metal Slug*, *Fatal Fury* and *Super Sidekicks*. He adds that one game is unlikely to ever be added to his collection though. "The one Holy Grail that I'm still looking for would be *Matrimelee* which sells on eBay for $3,000 plus, a price I can't justify paying."

Although he still collects today, James admits that it's becoming more challenging. "Pricing has become a significant concern in the collecting community," he admits. "Over the last three to four years, there has been a substantial rise in prices, primarily due to individuals using retro gaming as an investment strategy." There are ways to mitigate this though, which is why James has a large collection of Japanese Saturn and Dreamcast games. "Many of these games are in English and require minimal or no understanding of Japanese," he says. "Moreover, the Japanese versions of games that were released in the West are often significantly less expensive."

So what's the best advice James can offer to new collectors? "I would say buy the games you like rather than buying games because you think they will increase in value. As fun as collecting is, the real joy is still in playing the games."

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com retrogamermag.bsky.social

FREE!
CARTRIDGE INSIDE THIS PACKAGE
Vectrex
GRAPHIC COMPUTER SYSTEM
3D IMAGER
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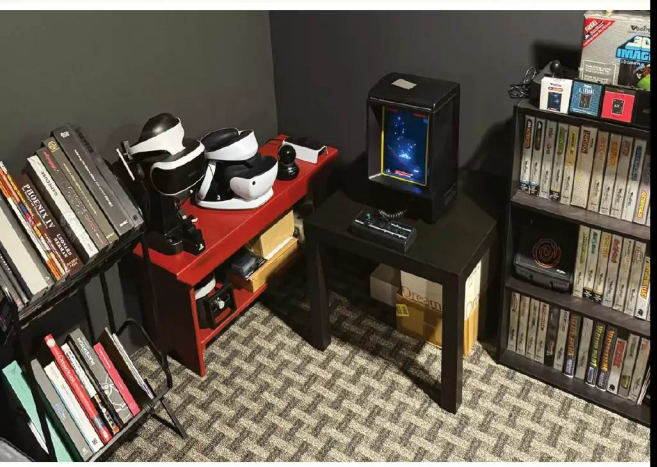
PLUGS INTO THE VECTREX CONSOLE TO GIVE YOU GAME PLAY IN REAL 3-D!
PUT ON THE 3-D IMAGER ... PLUG IN A SPECIAL 3-D GAME CARTRIDGE... AND GET READY FOR A REAL 3-D GAME EXPERIENCE! IN COLOR!

VECTREX 3D IMAGER
"The Vectrex to this day looks incredible with its vector graphics and this peripheral enabled you to play certain games in 3D, which considering that it came out in 1982, was pretty amazing."
PAID $100



JEWEL IN THE CROWN

DIVER CX-1

■ "My love for the Dreamcast makes owning its rarest iteration (with fewer than 50 units still existing) a true delight. The Dreamcast was pioneering in numerous aspects, and the CX-1 exemplifies this, having been launched in 2000 complete with a keyboard and webcam."

PAID: $4,000

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

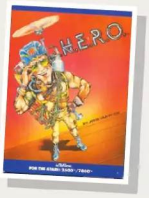
THE COVER STAR

STRIDER

One of the Mega Drive's best arcade conversions is still relatively cheap to buy. You can purchase a complete PAL copy for just under **£15.** However, if you want the superior Japanese version with its incredible box art, that costs up to **£50.**

JETPAC

There are numerous Spectrum variants out there. The ROM version is the priciest and can hit **£125,** while the Silver Label version hits **£50.** The regular and Ricochet versions rarely top **£25.**



HERO

You'll be holding out for a *HERO* for a long time if you want to get this on the cheap. Complete editions sell for as much as **£200,** while even a cart can reach **£90.**

DIZZY: PRINCE OF THE YOLKFOLK

Dizzy's popular adventure is rising in price with its standalone edition hitting **£45.** If you just want to play the game, grab *Dizzy's Excellent Adventures* instead, which rarely tops **£25** and contains four other *Dizzy* games.

PANZA KICK BOXING

This fighter won't deliver a knockout blow to your wallet. The Amiga version rarely tops **£40** and its variants go for considerably less.

DUNGEON KEEPER

While a sealed copy recently sold for **£400,** the regular edition rarely hits **£30.** *Dungeon Master Gold* is even better value, coming in at under a tenner.

TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND

The Xbox 360 version Nick owns is still easily available and won't cost more than **£7** complete. If you feel a little more flush, you can buy a collection containing all three Lara games on Xbox 360 for around **£40.**

FIRE EMBLEM: THE SACRED STONES

As Darran mentioned, this isn't cheap. Sealed copies can go as high as **£500,** although unsealed has dropped quite substantially and typically hits **£100.** A standalone cartridge is cheaper, but be sure to look out for counterfeits.

SANVEIN

It might be obscure, but *Sanvein* isn't expensive to purchase on Sony's first console. PAL copies rarely hit **£20** and can often be secured for under **£5.**

HOW MUCH?!

THE DEATH AND RETURN OF SUPERMAN

You'd think that someone starting their bid at **£1,500** might be starting too high, but you'd be very wrong. There were only two bidders and the final price only went **£50** higher, but that's still a large amount of cash for a very average game.

Prices correct at time of print

REARRANGING THE SHED

Darran talks us through the new 2.0 version of his gaming space

I've not been happy with my shed for a while and it probably started during the pandemic. It was an incredibly difficult time for everyone, but I was at least fortunate enough to have my shed to work in when so many others didn't have the same luxury of space. As the pandemic passed and working from home continued, the shed became something of a dumping ground for **Retro Gamer**-related deliveries and there was an ugly looking bookcase I'd rescued from the old office which just seemed to dominate the space.

As the months went by I found myself spending less and less time in the shed as it just didn't feel like my own personal space anymore. There were **Retro Gamer** magazines wherever you looked, boxes of *Street Fighter* figures and all sorts of other gaming paraphernalia stacked up against the walls and it was starting to look like a hoarder's paradise. I even started having dreams that the huge bookcase of magazines would fall on me and I'd be crushed to death by 20 year's worth of **Retro Gamers**.

I decided to redesign the interior of my shed and that plan inevitably involved spending money, because furniture certainly isn't cheap. The new room had to fulfil a number of objectives: my work-related stuff needed to be condensed, my MAME cabinet needed to be sold and I wanted to find a way to house my new growing obsession with 1/6-scale action figures, while still having a nice retro collection to focus on.

> "It was starting to look like a hoarder's paradise"

My giant PVM limits what can be placed below it, so I kept that part of my setup exactly the same as it always was. I did however buy several more Kallax units to complement the 2x2 cube I already had and the 2x4 cube that was part of my desk. A second 2x2 unit was placed on top of the first and that now houses my entire NTSC N64 collection, along with a complete collection of *N64* magazines and a near-complete set of *Nintendo Magazine System* from the same era.

I bought another 1x4 Kallax to go in the corner of my shed where I used to keep my camera lenses and that now houses all my board games (with the ones I regularly play like *Wingspan* and *Meadow* now living in the house). A 4x4 Kallax now sits right next to my desk unit and houses everything from my expanding PlayStation collection, to my SNES games, favourite gaming books and complete Evercade collection. Additionally I bought several glass shelves to make better use of the space and to make it easier to stack my smaller games.

I kept my original gaming shelves (they don't extend out as far as the Kallax units, while an additional thinner unit houses my CD and Sega Saturn collection. I ended up moving all the games over to one side with the exception of the N64 games so everything looks largely uniform. I also bought several frames for some of the Nintendo 64 posters I'd bought off Nintendo's official store, as well as two canvas prints of Joel and Ellie from *The Last Of Us*. Finally, my brother Matt installed some brand-new spotlights for me, which has greatly improved the lighting in my shed.

That left my 1/6-scale figure collection to house and Ikea came to the rescue there as well. Many collectors swear by Detolfs, but Ikea no longer makes them and it's not practical to get all-glass cabinets sent through the post. I instead went with Ikea's replacement called Blaliden, which has a smaller overall footprint but can still comfortably hold at least two figures per shelf. I then bought more Kallax units, two 1x2s and a single cube to act as risers, and sourced additional doors so I could hide stuff inside them.

It's all finished off with a *Jurassic Park* rug and a new oil-based heater and the end result is a room that I love spending time in. It finally feels like my personal space again and I love nothing more than sitting cross-legged on my rug, flicking through an issue of *N64* magazine, while listening to a CD or tape and bathing in the glow of my lighted cabinets.

It certainly wasn't cheap getting everything together, but it looks fantastic and once again reminds me that I'm very fortunate to have such a retro sanctuary. ✱

THE SPEND

WHAT IT COST TO UPDATE DARRAN'S RETRO HAVEN

BLALIDEN GLASS CABINETS
I had just enough space to house five of these cabinets, which gives me enough room for 20 to 40 figures (I currently have 21).
COST: £440

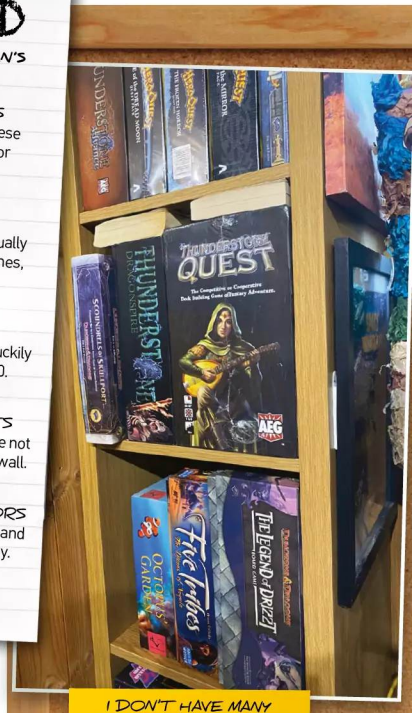
KALLAX UNITS
While many use them for records, they're equally good for housing board games and videogames, once you've added suitable shelving.
COST: £278

CEFRANK LIGHTS
Bought to properly show off my new figures. Luckily Amazon had a sale on, saving me nearly £80.
COST: £160

THE LAST OF US CANVAS PRINTS
You can't have Joel without Ellie and while they're not officially licensed, they still look fantastic on the wall.
COST: £70

GLASS SHELVES AND KALLAX DOORS
Essential to make better use of your Kallax units and hiding things to make the room look less messy.
COST: £80

TOTAL COST: £1,028



I DON'T HAVE MANY BOARD GAMES LEFT, BUT IT'S UNLIKELY I'LL PART WITH THESE ONES.

IT HAS TAKEN FOUR LONG YEARS, BUT I NOW HAVE A COMPLETE SET OF N64 MAGAZINE.

THE SIZE OF MY PVM LIMITS WHAT I CAN DO HERE, SO THE CABINET AND SYSTEMS HAVE STAYED THE SAME.
HOT TOYS ARE MY LATEST OBSESSION. I'VE BEEN SELLING A LOT OF GAMES IN ORDER TO BUY THEM.
I NOW LOVE SPENDING MY EVENINGS DOING A LITTLE READING WITH A NICE CUP OF TEA.
I'M GOING FOR A COMPLETE SET OF FIGURES FROM GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY, JUST NEED DRAX, MANTIS AND COSMO NOW.
HERE'S WHERE MY ROOF STARTED LEAKING. I'VE PATCHED IT UP, BUT WILL KEEP AN EYE ON IT.
THIS IS PRETTY MUCH THE ENTIRETY OF MY GAMING COLLECTION (NEWER SYSTEMS ARE IN THE HOUSE).
FOX 64
furry animals prepare for launch!

MY SAFE SPACE

Readers share where they like to game

Tony Cruise
Mine is in a double external garage (that has never had a car in it). Various arcade machines have built up, hiding some of the collection of late.

Lord Arse!
Mine has its own room next to our living room. It makes me feel like I wish I didn't work so hard and wasn't tired all of the time! Of course, when I do find the time and energy, it's an absolute joy.

Nightquaker
My gaming space is my regular computer in a regular room. It feels pretty poggers.

Brian H
I've only got a box room for gaming but it suits my needs just fine.

David
My previous gen gaming space is in my spare room. My wife calls it the hacky shack because of all the tinkering I do in there. I can play basically anything I want on these boxes.

Taggsta
The family built my gaming studio from a kit. I enjoy it the most when friends visit for a gaming and beers night.

Daz
My little retro cabin was bought by my partner, "As long as that crap isn't in the house you can keep collecting." [Mel said that same - Ed]

Llama King
I only have a small room but it's my pride and joy. Three walls waiting to be filled up with games. I don't have many games but am very very happy with what I do have.

J Newton
In my basement. Makes me feel happy to have lived through all of these eras of gaming...

Tom
I love that my kids use my gaming room as a hangout space with all of their friends. It has my classic TVs and consoles for me, but also includes new systems for them. It's like watching my past play out again today.

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

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STAR LETTER

PRESERVATION FOR ALL

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I was disappointed to hear about the US Copyright Office's refusal to grant an exemption to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that would allow researchers to access a library's games remotely. I've been following the work of the Video Game History Foundation for a while and it's disheartening to hear that its support of the Software Preservation Network hasn't achieved a good outcome.

So many games are being lost to time and with publishers either refusing, or being unable to make these games available to modern audiences, it's not surprising that so many are turning to piracy in order to seek out the games they enjoyed playing during their childhoods. I know that the VGHF are going to keep fighting, but it feels like corporate greed is once again being catered for and it's us gamers that are missing out.

Regards,
David Jacobson

You're quite right that VGHF is going to keep fighting and we wish it the best of luck. The preservation of any medium is important and it's sad that so few companies are willing to support an accessible digital library like the SPN was suggesting. If publishers made these games available it wouldn't be such an issue, but as the VGHF has proven over the last three years, this simply isn't the case. Have a book to help get over your disappointment.

» [SNES] There's no legal way to currently enjoy *Super Aleste*, making it just one of thousands of games that could be lost to time.

» [PC] Darran can't wait to upgrade this version of *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* with all of emoose's updates.

OUTRUN 2006, SUPERCHARGED

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
A clever guy named emoose restored online multiplayer for this classic. Unfortunately it wasn't in time for the 20th anniversary *Outrun 2* issue, but it's still pretty cool, and it also has some neat stuff like HD textures and custom music.
Regards,
Michael

Darran's currently in the process of adding the patch to his Steam version, so once it's all up and running we'll share more info in the mag.

WHO NEEDS 8-BIT?

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Strap in people, as I am going to say something which will create trouble in the ranks within the retro-gaming community. Here it is – all 8-bit computers are rubbish. Obviously I need to justify this bold statement followed by the mic drop at the end. I am 46 years young and grew up with various 8-bit Atari and Commodore computers, which had on the whole, what we would now call bloatware. I loved the arcade games back then, still do, but when they got converted to those computers it was always disappointing. I feel the 16-bit era was when you could finally play arcade-quality games at home. I even had a Master System for a while and while it had some decent platforming games, its arcade conversions like *Mortal Kombat* were not even playable and should not have been released. Mic drop!

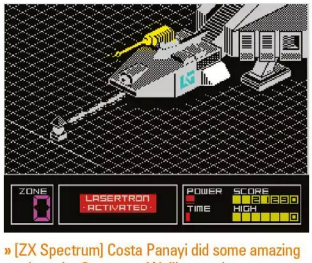
Keep up the good work, I love the magazine and Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.
Kind regards
Alan 'Victor Meldrew' Jenkins

» [Atari 2600] It may have come out on a crusty old 8-bit, but Carol Shaw's *River Raid* is still great fun to play.

You hear that sound, Alan? It's the sound of pitchforks being sharpened. While it's certainly true that some 8-bit games have aged poorly, the same can be said for other generations as well. You're quite right that the 16-bit era certainly saw arcade conversions come of age, but we'll have to agree to disagree on your first point.

LOST HIGHWAY

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I've been playing *Highway Encounter* on The Spectrum (awesome piece of kit by the way) and I was looking back at other games by Costa Panayi, particularly *Cyclone* and *TLL*. Any chance of a feature on Vortex Software games? His graphical style was quite distinct and I loved the games he did.
Regards,
John Dunn



» [ZX Spectrum] Costa Panayi did some amazing work on the Spectrum. We'll try and sort a feature out for later this year.

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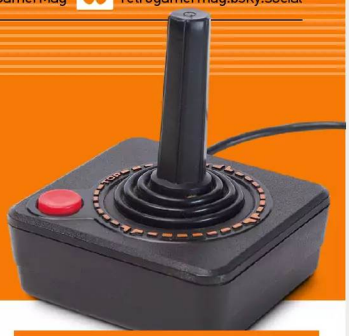

» Nick sent us this image of *Factory Panic* playing on his Game Gear. Our own Nick suggests to seek out *Popils* next.

Funnily enough John, Darran's also been enjoying Costa's games recently. Amazingly, we don't seem to have covered Vortex Software, so we'll reach out to Costa and see what we can do.

PANICKED NO LONGER

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

I have been a subscriber now for over seven years and I still look forward to getting my copy in the mail every month. It allows me to kick back and relax over a coffee or read whilst on a vacation. Your articles have introduced me to a variety of retro consoles and many games I never even knew existed. Most recently I followed up on a two-page feature you did on *Factory Panic* on the Sega Game Gear and found a seller in Germany willing to let go of it via eBay, something that I otherwise would not have thought to find anywhere. Thank you for your investigative journalism and keep up the good work.

Nick

We're glad you're enjoying *Factory Panic*, Nick. We love hearing that readers have actively sought out games that are featured in the magazine. Hopefully it wasn't too expensive to purchase.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Christmas Gaming

Yes, we know Christmas has been and gone now, but as we were writing this it was still weeks away. Anyway, here's what we're all planning to play over the break. Andy is hoping to get stuck into *STALKER 2*, while Darran is hoping that Santa Claus will bring him *RoboCop: Rogue City* and *Alan Wake II*. Nick is hoping to get *Balatro* and "sink a horrible amount of time into it", while Tim tells us he's going to tackle *Indiana Jones And The Great Circle*. We all know he's probably just going to play *Baldur's Gate III* for the third time though.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Mega Drive arcade conversion?

» [Mega Drive] We never noticed lag, but we agree that *Strider* was one hell of a Mega Drive conversion.

Dr no yes maybe
A little left-field but *Atomic Runner* was rather excellent. It took an OK arcade game in *Chelnov* and made it so much better. I would also say *TMNT: Hyperstone Heist*, as we all know it was basically a reskinned *Turtles In Time*.

Chris Widnes
Super Hang-On has a superb port, and was shipped with consoles as a plus. They enhanced it with an Original Mode and the core gameplay is all there. It's still one of the most playable old-school racing games available.

Eldritchbot - Kev
Street Fighter II: Special Champion Edition. You could argue that the sound wasn't on point with the SNES port, but maaaan was that game an important win for Sega. It also nailed the original's gameplay and absolutely kept my Mega Drive active and alive in 1993/1994.

Planetmat
Strider was the most impressive back in the day. First 1MB ROM, massive sprites, arcade perfect until it moves and the lag hits. *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* and *Forgotten Worlds* are also pretty good.

Count Homer
Mortal Kombat 3's Mega Drive port is the best console version. It might lack the colours of the SNES port, but it has a lot more sound effects and the stages look closer to the arcade version.

Alan Boiston
I got *Strider* with my Mega Drive. It was AMAZING back in the day along with *Tatsujin*/*Truxton* which was also a great conversion at the time.

Andrew
Altered Beast. The main reason being it was one of the games me and my late father would play for hours, each day, when I was a kid. A cherished memory.

Age of Bahamut
Hellfire, a wonderful conversion of the Toaplan classic that easily rivalled the likes of *R-Type* and *Gradius*.

Bastion Balthazar Bux
Atomic Runner, no doubt. Way more beautiful than the original arcade game (named *Chelnov*).

Richardm
Super Hang-On, I played that game to death! I never quite completed it though so maybe I should try again some day!

retro GAMER

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ENDGAME

PITFALL: THE MAYAN ADVENTURE

» We're sure there are better ways to bond with your son than taking them on a jungle expedition in search of Mayan treasure, but that's what Pitfall Harry has done. His parenting style is brought further into question when he goes missing, leaving Harry Jr to pick up the slack, but will young Harry succeed?

01

» After facing scorpions, jaguars and porcupines, Harry Jr encounters a gigantic stone guardian that's protecting the mythical treasure. With the behemoth downed, Harry rushes off to search for his dad.

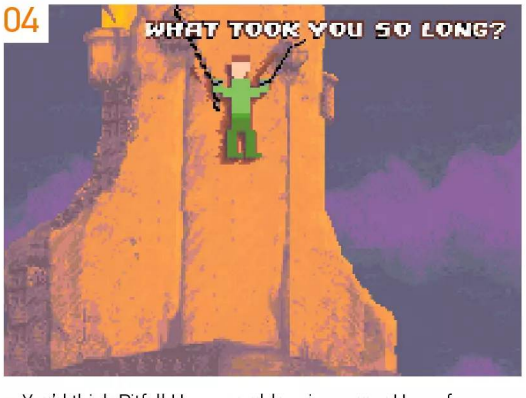
02

» Harry can't see any trace of the treasure he's been battling for, but he does find a gigantic stone monolith that suspiciously looks like a monument used for sacrifice. The young lad hesitantly looks upwards.

03

» And there's Pitfall Harry, trussed up, battered, but looking otherwise identical to the first time he went off adventuring back in the early Eighties. We can't see a family resemblance, but Harry Jr's mum assures us it's there.

04



» You'd think Pitfall Harry would praise young Harry for his resourcefulness, but no, unfortunately he simply chides Harry Jr for dilly-dallying. If there's a father of the year award, the old adventurer certainly won't be receiving it anytime soon.

05

» The pair head off into the sunset, and the older explorer recounts his earlier adventures loudly so every dangerous creature in the jungle can hear them. Harry Jr is sure the lesson here is that his father was the treasure he sought all along, but honestly, he'd rather have the gold.

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